

THE DAVID GAREJA/ KESHIKCHI DAG PUZZLE: IDENTITY QUESTION VS. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

In a fairly unstable South Caucasus, where Armenia and Azerbaijan are practically at war and Georgia's relations with Armenia being "special but not quite strategic," the Azerbaijan-Georgia strategic partnership warrants further discussion.

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Caught in between 'difficult neighbors' the South Caucasus can be characterized as a region with a volatile security situation and of geostrategic importance. In fact, decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw a profusion of territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space. All three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have territorial conflicts. These conflicts are often referred to as 'frozen.' A rather expedient, Western-imposed definition of 'frozen' does not really reflect the situation on the ground.¹ Therefore, for the purposes of this article, the definition of 'unresolved' is considered more appropriate.

In a fairly unstable South Caucasus,² where Armenia and Azerbaijan are practically at war and Georgia's relations with Armenia being "special but not quite strategic,"³ the Azerbaijan-Georgia strategic partnership warrants further discussion. The region's growing geostrategic importance is due to Azerbaijan and Georgia having jointly implemented a number of energy and transportation-related projects. These have the potential to link Europe to Asia, while bypassing Russia.

However, the Azerbaijan-Georgia relationship is threatened from time to time by a border 'dispute' over the monastery complex of David Gareja. The complex is also known as Keshish Dag (Priest Mountain) or Keshikchi Dag (Guardian Mountain).⁴ The border dispute around the monastery risks undermining the impor-

tant projects implemented within the framework of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey strategic triangle. This further threatens the fragile stability of the region.⁵ Some experts point to third parties "willfully" or "inadvertently" contributing to the slump in the Georgia-Azerbaijan relationship, including foreign powers such as Russia and the West.⁶ Some suggest rising tensions with Baku will harm Tbilisi's prospects for deeper integration with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁷

The case of David Gareja / Keshish/Keshikchi Dag

The problem

Despite almost three decades having passed since the Soviet Union collapsed, the Union's legacy still lingers on in Georgia and Azerbaijan. This includes unresolved territorial conflicts and border issues pending resolution. Azerbaijan and Georgia have a common 480 kilometers-length state border, one-third of which is still not demarcated.⁸ In 1996, a Georgian-Azerbaijani intergovernmental commission on delimitation and demarcation of the border was established. Some suggest that its role was downgraded when Georgia decided to combine all border negotiating teams into one, thus almost certainly guaranteeing the border with Azerbaijan would receive less attention.⁹ The process has been hindered by the lack of agreement over the David Gareja monastery complex bor-

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der dispute. For Georgians, the complex is considered an important part of their religious heritage.¹⁰ Azerbaijan has repeatedly rejected the offer of a land swap by the Georgians in the past.¹¹ According to an informal agreement between the two countries a simplified border control regime allows monks, pilgrims and tourists to travel freely from Georgia to the part of the complex located on Azerbaijani territory.¹² However, the border issue continues to spark controversy.

Chronology of events

The border 'dispute' itself is not new. The complex was divided between the then Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Soviet topographic maps put the David Gareja monastery complex partially within Azerbaijani SSR's borders. In 1963, these maps were approved by the Georgian Supreme Soviet. The boundary gained significance with the emergence of independent Georgia and Azerbaijan in 1991.¹³

In 2007, a diplomatic row broke out between Azerbaijan and Georgia as to whether the monastery complex is historically Georgian or belongs to Caucasian Albania, to which it is believed Azerbaijan is a successor state.¹⁴ At that time, an Azerbaijani news agency affiliated with Russia's RIA Novosti broke the story.¹⁵ The significance of the monastery complex was reaffirmed when it was included

on the UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Tentative List¹⁶ and represents an important landmark for Georgia.¹⁷ Due to the historical significance of the complex, Azerbaijan established along its part of the border the State Historical and Cultural Reserve Keshikchidag.¹⁸ According to most available maps the site's Udabno and Chichkhituri monasteries are located on Azerbaijani territory.¹⁹ This is the most disputed territory, where both sides dispute every centimeter.²⁰ There were some high-level discussions regarding the transfer of the Bertubani monastery to Georgia whilst Azerbaijan would keep the strategic heights. This prompted outrage in both countries.²¹ Azerbaijani sources place the Bertubani Monastery inside Azerbaijan, which Georgia does not question.²²

In 2012, repositioning of Azerbaijani border guards along the disputed border section prevented visitors from Georgia from accessing some of the sites. This caused controversy which was resolved. Both sides agreed that Georgian citizens and foreign tourists would be allowed onto the entire territory of the complex without any restrictions until the delineation process is finalized.²³ Both countries recognized that the benefits of reliable energy (i.e. the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline) and transportation ties (i.e. the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway link) outweighed this border dispute.²⁴

In March 2019, the Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili – whose candidacy was supported by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party – raised the issue of the border delimitation.²⁵ This was her first official visit to Azerbaijan as the President of Georgia.²⁶ During her visit, the President also highlighted the "occupation of territories," thereby showing solidarity with Azerbaijan on this issue:



We together regained independence and have suffered similar tragedies over the past several years. We are still suffering the occupation of our territories. The occupation lines still remain as open wounds to us which on the one hand prevent our development but on the other hand, we managed to strengthen our states and their economies.²⁷

The President also touched upon the creation of a safe energy corridor, which is of high importance for the region and the world.²⁸ President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan also stressed the solidarity both countries demonstrate in relation to each other's territorial problems.²⁹ President Zourabichvili reiterated her position, while visiting the Armenian capital of Yerevan, where she accused the Armenians of occupying Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁰

In April the same year, President Zourabichvili made an appearance at the David Gareja monastery complex. Standing in what Azerbaijan considers its territory, the President publicly called for the need to reach an agreement on the border.³¹ Her visit appeared to take the Azerbaijani government by surprise and her actions considered a serious diplomatic *faux pas*.³² Azerbaijan reacted in a reserved manner to the visit and statement.³³ Following her visit, Azerbaijani border forces increased their presence at the monastery complex, and reportedly restricted access to some parts.³⁴ The imposed restrictions on Georgian priests, monks and other visitors coincided with the Orthodox Easter celebration.³⁵ However, it also coincided with Baku's hosting of Formula 1.³⁶ The border was reopened three days later, thanks to the two countries' foreign ministers, who took the necessary steps to diffuse the situation.³⁷

Both sides then agreed to activate the Georgia-Azerbaijan Bilateral Delimitation Commission.³⁸ The Commission first met in Baku in May 2019, where an agreement was reached on conducting a joint inspection of the uncoordinated parts of the border.³⁹ In the same month, at the request of some hierarchs of the Georgian Orthodox Church the Baku-Tbilisi-Ankara-Istanbul highway was blocked by hundreds of Georgians.⁴⁰ This road is of strategic importance as it links Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey. The traffic was restored in a couple of hours. However, the following morning, some three thousand demonstrators gathered at the Georgian-Azerbaijani border. They crossed the border into Azerbaijan and surrounded the Udabno and Chichkhituri monasteries.⁴¹ Azerbaijan responded with deliberative restraint to what was a peaceful rally. There was an agreement with Georgia not to interfere with the movement of unarmed people.⁴² The head of the Georgian Orthodox Church played an important role in calling on the Church hierarchs not to jeopardize Georgian-Azerbaijani relations.⁴³ He also accused a "third force" in the Caucasus region of antagonizing relations between the two countries.⁴⁴

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Also in May, various forces in Georgia started mobilizing on the matter. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, an anti-Western and pro-Russian political party leading among these.⁴⁵ The party held a rally in June in Tbilisi which attracted some 10,000 people. One party leader called on Azerbaijan to cede the territory to Georgia. Another accused the former government of Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili of allegedly selling the David Gareja complex to Azerbaijan. He called for the investigation and punishment of the former government.⁴⁶ Some suggest the Patriots' efforts did not just stop at rallies and appeared to have pressured allies in the Georgian Orthodox Church to speak out on the matter.⁴⁷

These developments culminated in an incident in mid-July, when a group of Georgian citizens confronted an Azerbaijani border guard near the Keshikchidagh complex in a disputed section of the Azerbaijani-Georgian border. This incident led to harsh rhetoric in social media and inflamed emotions between strategic partners.⁴⁸ It also led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan to formally protest this violation of the Azerbaijani border.⁴⁹ Khalaf Khalafov, the Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative of the President of Azerbaijan on border and Caspian Sea issues, described the event as a "provocation against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan."⁵⁰ His position in relation to the issue of Keshikchi Dag is that "any religious-cultural or any other non-legal fact cannot be the basis for the delimitation of state borders."⁵¹

In October, the Georgian Church said it would not tolerate the construction of a new border post by Azerbaijan on the disputed territory. They called upon the Grand Mufti of the Caucasus to mediate in this difficult situation.⁵² According to Azerbaijan, the border post was intended to further protect historical and cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people.⁵³ In the same month, the Georgian Prime Minister (PM) Giorgi Gakharia launched his tour to neighboring countries by first visiting Azerbaijan. He told the Azerbaijani President that the "visit will once again show our allies and friends that there are no problems between the two countries which have not been settled in a friendly and brotherly manner."⁵⁴ They openly discussed the border issue and the Georgian PM stated that the issue must be resolved considering the national



interests of both countries, cultural heritage and the church interests.⁵⁵

The governments in Baku and Tbilisi do everything possible to avoid any tensions over the monastery complex.⁵⁶ Both understand that irresponsible comments on the issue might serve the interests of third parties, who could benefit from their strained relations.⁵⁷

The significance of the monastery complex

As stated earlier, the significance of the monastery complex to Georgia is predominantly related to its religious heritage recognized by the UNESCO. Azerbaijan has been reluctant to accept Georgia's repeated offer of a similar sized territory elsewhere along the border in exchange for sovereignty over the monastery complex.⁵⁸ Baku has a number of reasons that could explain such reluctance. One is related to the loss of 20% of the country's territory – the Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts – due to the ongoing territorial conflict with Armenia. This has made the Azerbaijani government uneasy about any territorial concessions.⁵⁹ Another reason is the historical case for sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁰ Azerbaijan, being successor state to Caucasian Albania, has been pushed to further embrace its

Christian past despite its predominantly Muslim population.⁶¹ Some say that Azerbaijan is building a European-style multicultural nation and the David Gareja monastery complex reinforces Azerbaijani identity as a nation of Christians, Muslims and others.⁶² The most important reason, however, probably is the strategic location of the complex, at a high level ground only 30 miles from the border with Armenia.⁶³

In addition, Azerbaijan's involvement in the war with Armenia, has cast a shadow on its border with Georgia.⁶⁴ Azerbaijani forces placed mines on the frontier with Georgia, including within Georgian territory, during the 1992-1994 Armenia-Azerbaijan war.⁶⁵ The complexity of the border problem is further compounded by several hundred thousand Azerbaijanis living in Georgia.⁶⁶

Despite this, the border between Azerbaijan and Georgia is considered as the most stable in the region.⁶⁷ Both countries having more serious territorial disputes to settle, delimiting the border between them has never been a high priority.⁶⁸ Instead, they are focusing their efforts on building "the most robust economic and strategic partnership between any two states in the region."⁶⁹ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has completed a full demarcation of its borders only with Russia.⁷⁰ Georgia has only demarcated its border with Turkey.⁷¹

Third Parties Concerned and Wider Implications

The Russian factor

The dispute over David Gareja did not occur in isolation. In June 2019, mass protests swept the capital of Georgia over a Russian parliamentarian occupying the chair of the Speaker of the Georgian parliament, resulting in the latter's resignation.⁷² This incident led the President of Russia "to go on a well-rehearsed rant against Georgia."⁷³ Flights were then stopped between Russia and Georgia. A possible ban on Georgian wine imports and restrictions on cross-border transfers had also been mooted. Vladimir Putin's decision to hold back on sanctions has proved interesting.⁷⁴

Russia's logic is obvious, i.e. control over Georgia and Azerbaijan means control over the east-west corridor, supporting ethnic separatism and coup attempts.⁷⁵ Georgia is perceived by Russia as the easiest to manipulate.⁷⁶ This is due to its "deplorably polarized political landscape",⁷⁷ resulting in Russian 'hybrid tactics' being more frequently deployed in Georgia.⁷⁸ Some experts point out that after a number of years of uninterrupted Georgian Dream Party's (GD) rule, the public attitude toward this political faction has changed drastically. The growing uncertainty on the part of the majority of Georgians over the ruling party's sincerity in pursuing a pro-Western policy and absence of any plans to capitulate to Moscow is cited as a major factor in the GD's drop of popularity.⁷⁹ Some go as far as to suggest that the recent developments in relation to the border issue and increasing Georgian nationalist rhetoric are another method by GD to distract the population from other more significant issues.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is known to be one of the centers Moscow has focused on for influence in Georgia, is preparing for a transition of power from the 87-year old Patriarch to his yet to be appointed successor.⁸¹ Some have the view that Georgia and Azerbaijan stand to gain from the border dispute.⁸²

Nevertheless, Russia's 'soft power' is actively present in both countries. It enhances it in Georgia through local pro-Russian NGOs that seek to promote, among other things, an anti-Turkish narrative. It encourages the idea that it is better to be under Russian influence than being part of the Islamic state's expansion.⁸³ In Azerbaijan the absence of Western-led media and educational opportunities serves Russia's interest. The lack of government strategy in these areas risks allowing Russian-led and pro-Russian outlets to monopolize the media.⁸⁴ Some experts suggest that the growing number of Azerbaijani students in Russian universities will support integration with Russia rather than with the West. Ultimately, policymaking will be influenced through their presence in public positions and in government.⁸⁵

The West

The EU is overwhelmed by internal problems, some of its own making⁸⁶ and the US is focusing more on international order in general. The US views developments in the Eurasian region through the perspective of the ambitions of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, treating the Caucasus, including the South Caucasus region, as parts of larger geopolitical puzzles (i.e. the Greater Middle East, Wider Black Sea region, energy policy and democratization.)⁸⁷

The Azerbaijani-Georgian strategic partnership is of paramount importance to the West. This partnership is crucial for the West's access to Central Asia and the continued independence of Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁸⁸ The long-proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) has a real potential of being "a catalyst for potential changes that could affect the structure of the international system for decades to come."⁸⁹ The TCGP, while driving economic growth and promoting regional stability, at the same time, limits both Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia.⁹⁰ China also has a stake in the stability of the Azerbaijan-Georgian relations. The partnership is important for the East-West continental trade route which connects Europe with Asia.⁹¹

At the same time, the West also contributes to the weakening of the partnership. It 'plays favorites' by explicitly dividing regional states into 'better' and 'worse'.⁹² This approach may have been intended as a form of 'carrot and stick', but there is no evidence it has worked. To the contrary, the main effect has been to alienate those countries categorized as 'worse'.⁹³ Instead of nurturing and supporting the strategic link between the two, as used to be the case, the West has informally challenged them over their close ties. They consider Azerbaijan less democratic and therefore less deserving of support.⁹⁴ However, in doing so, the West risks accelerating Russian influence in Azerbaijan.⁹⁵

Possible Armenian trace?

The 'Armenian separatism' factor was also cited as a core element in the border dispute by some.⁹⁶ The chairman of the National Congress of Georgian Azerbaijanis "accused the Armenian lobby in Georgia of contributing directly to the provocations and tensions at the border."⁹⁷

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Some Armenians have suggested the David Gareja case is a “Karabakh in miniature.” They also suggest there are a great number of Georgian and Armenian inscriptions preserved in the monastery complex.⁹⁸ With some warning “Armenia should only be concerned with Georgia’s close partnership with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and should strive to minimize the influence of a third country on the [Armenia-Georgia] bilateral agenda.”⁹⁹

Potentially Dangerous Consequences

The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia did not emerge by default. During the period of transition to independence, Georgian nationalists harbored considerable anti-Muslim and anti-Azerbaijan feelings. This led to violent incidents in an area in Georgia heavily populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis.¹⁰⁰ The leadership of both countries then transformed their complex relationship into a strategic partnership. It was clearly understood by both presidents that the security of Georgia and Azerbaijan is indivisible.¹⁰¹ Their successors managed to further strengthen this partnership, making the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) the biggest foreign investor in Georgia.¹⁰² Some Georgians, including GD-linked politicians, often complain of the “allegedly heavy-handed behavior of SOCAR.”¹⁰³ The main opposition parties, however, acknowledge the positive role of the oil company as the largest taxpayer in the country.¹⁰⁴ In turn, Azerbaijanis complain of the “instability and unreliability of Georgian politics.”¹⁰⁵

Propaganda and further bolstering of anti-Islam, anti-Turkish, and anti-Azerbaijan forces in Georgia is the most potentially dangerous consequence of the border dispute. Local voices warned that Georgia is becoming overly dependent on Azerbaijan and Turkey.¹⁰⁶ This was further exacerbated with the Baku and Ankara’s decision to invite Russia and not Georgian representatives to an important meeting about modifying the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway project. Georgia’s absence at the meeting “was perceived as ‘humiliation’ by the country’s stronger and richer neighbors.”¹⁰⁷

Similarly anti-Georgia sentiments expressed in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani public became increasingly focused on the discussions over the border issue.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the issue of David Gareja/ Keshikchi Dag was no longer solely a topic of high-level dialogue.

Bound by Joint Projects

Azerbaijan and Georgia form the east-west axis connecting the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea.¹⁰⁹ There are large infrastructural projects involving both countries, including transit pipelines through which Azerbaijan’s oil

and gas is exported to the world. These include the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipelines, the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) System¹¹⁰ and the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP). Joint transportation-related projects include the BTK railroad, the Caspian Sea-Black Sea International Transport Corridor (ICT-CSBS) and the Lapis Lazuli transregional transit transport corridor (the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan transit corridor).¹¹¹

Both countries rely heavily on their strategic partnership. If one fails, so does the other.¹¹² This is particularly relevant given the partnership is no longer supported by personal friendship between the leaderships of both countries. Some go as far as to suggest the partnership between the two is considered simply as “a marriage of convenience”.¹¹³

Conclusion: *Status quo* as a way forward?

The relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia and the West is crucial at this time given the edginess of Western relations with Russia and Iran. Some experts suggest that the EU and US must press Azerbaijan and Georgia to continue to meet on the border issue until it is resolved.¹¹⁴ Both Georgia and Azerbaijan recognize the importance of mutually beneficial economic relations. However, both are facing more pressing problems. These challenges are the countries’ ongoing conflicts between Russia and Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹¹⁵ The experts also suggest “the pressure will be on both sides to avoid setting a precedent (i.e. border adjustments) that they can’t live with within these more significant conflicts.”¹¹⁶

Several options have been discussed and offered by Georgia to bring a solution to the border issue. For the reasons highlighted earlier any territorial exchange would appear not possible. Azerbaijan’s firm position is that there is no room for such exchange.¹¹⁷ However, some still do not exclude the possibility of territorial exchange, provided it is equitable.¹¹⁸

One option is to lease a different area of Georgia to Azerbaijan for their use for some years. Georgia would retain freedom of movement in the monastery complex, while it would remain part of Azerbaijan. Another option includes the area of the monastery complex becoming a tax-free zone.¹¹⁹

Possibly the most attractive solution is the creation of a common historical and cultural reserve. This will bring people together, pilgrims and tourists from across the world.¹²⁰ The initiative came from a group of Georgian scientists who believe cultural monument status would ease tensions, as both countries would receive economic

and other benefits.¹²¹ This solution was strongly opposed by Georgia's most influential and respected Church. The Church believes all the evidence points to Udabno and Chichkhituri monasteries located on the Georgian territory.¹²²

Governments in Azerbaijan and Georgia are facing internal challenges. Political opposition in Azerbaijan accuses the government of being too soft. Georgians do not believe in any kind of compromise in order to settle the disagreement over the border.¹²³ Nevertheless, both cannot afford to escalate tensions with one another. For Georgia, any serious deterioration in their relationship with Azerbaijan is likely to have devastating economic, political, and geopolitical consequences. This is due to Georgia's weakening democracy, growing internal polarization and the fragile domestic climate.¹²⁴ Moreover, Georgia is lacking a leader who can successfully lead the negotiation process. For Azerbaijan the president is fully in charge of the political processes.¹²⁵ However, losing its access route to Turkey, Russia, the Black Sea, and Europe would mean halting international mega-projects and di-

minishing Azerbaijan's strategic geopolitical stance.¹²⁶

The future of all western interests is tied up in the security and stability of the South Caucasus.¹²⁷ With the realization of important joint transportation and pipeline projects the region will continue to grow, inviting more lucrative international projects. Such projects are vital for "Europe's post-COVID economic recovery, when environmental considerations are expected to be even more present in decision-making than before the pandemic."¹²⁸

"There are already too many disputes and problems in the South Caucasus. A dispute between Azerbaijan and Georgia is neither necessary, nor inevitable, nor in anyone's interest."¹²⁹ Having survived alongside difficult neighbors and the ongoing transition from Soviet totalitarianism, both Georgia and Azerbaijan must continue to protect their strategic partnership.¹³⁰ Both must continue to support each other and mutually respect the current *status quo* in the case of David Gareja/ Keshikchi Dag. This seems tenable, at least for now while the process of delimitation and demarcation of the border is continued through dialogue and consultation.

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