

Church Dispute Strains Relations Between Azerbaijan and Georgia

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Executive Summary: Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested a Georgian Orthodox Church statement on restoration work at Kurmukh's Church of St. George. Baku disputes the church's Georgian identity and calls the statement an encroachment on its sovereignty.

- The Georgian Dream government has avoided confronting Baku, while opposition parties backed the Patriarchate. Social media hostility, a vandalized bust of former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, and pro-Russian appeals have since deepened tensions.
- Baku's growing assertiveness since taking full control of Nagorno-Karabakh raises concern that it could advance historical claims to Georgian territory, particularly because the border between the two countries remains undelimited.

On September 25, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested a Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) statement on restoration work at the Church of St. George in Kurmukh, in Azerbaijan's Gakh District (Facebook/sazupatriarchate, September 24; Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 25). The Patriarchate called the church an important monument of Georgia's spiritual and cultural heritage and said it was proceeding without coordination with Tbilisi or official notification from Baku. Azerbaijan rejected the church's attribution to Georgia's religious or ecclesiastical heritage. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry accused the GOC of encroaching on Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and objected to the use of Georgian toponymy, stating that it is "unacceptable to designate geographical and historical toponyms located on the territory of Azerbaijan by other names" (Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 25).

Azerbaijani outlet 1news.az amplified the government's position in a commentary published the same day. On September 25, the publication presented the GOC's statement not as a purely ecclesiastical or cultural matter, but as an expression of territorial claims and an attempt to revise the region's historical map. The article cited the ministry's warning that the Georgian Patriarchate "is advised against repeating the well-known approaches of the Armenian Church and following its example." The article further warned that, should Tbilisi continue making similar statements, Azerbaijan could raise the issue of a systematic and objective study of Albanian heritage within Georgia (1news.az, September 25). Rather than limiting the issue to the Kurmukh Church's historical or ecclesiastical affiliation, the article also broadens the dispute to territorial claims, historical narratives, and the treatment of Azerbaijani heritage in Georgia.

This is far from the first dispute between Azerbaijan and Georgia over the ownership and identity of churches and monasteries in present-day Azerbaijan. Similar disagreements have emerged over several monuments, including the David Gareji monastery complex (Modern.az, September 11). Historically, including during the Soviet period, the Georgian cultural and religious identity of several of these monuments was not challenged as strongly as it is today. As with Armenian churches on its territory, Azerbaijan maintains that the monuments form part of its historical

heritage, linking them to the legacy of Caucasian Albania, whose territory partially overlapped with present-day Azerbaijan. The Church of St. George in Kurmukh remained active for many years. Georgian clergy conducted Orthodox services exclusively in their own language for a congregation drawn from Azerbaijan's ethnic Georgian community, which has been shrinking year by year. The church has also seen several separate incidents. In 2024, an Azerbaijani electronic music artist filmed a music video inside the church, including on the ambo, for a composition incorporating Georgian folk motifs and released it on YouTube. The video sparked outrage from the Patriarchate of Georgia, which described the incident as a desecration of Georgian sacred heritage. At the time, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not question either the church's name or its Georgian identity. The artist removed the video from YouTube and said it was filmed to express love and respect for Georgian culture (Facebook/sazupatriarchate, August 1, 2024).

Azerbaijan appears to link the church's identity, and even its Georgian name, directly to alleged territorial claims by another country. This raises a broader question of religious tolerance and the Georgian community's right to preserve its religious and cultural identity. Rejecting the church's Georgian origin leaves unclear where that community can pray and conduct services in its own language and according to its Orthodox tradition. The contrast with Georgia is sharp, as hundreds of mosques operate there and Muslim communities freely practice their religion and preserve their traditions (Report, April 21, 2017). The dispute therefore extends beyond one church's historical affiliation to the community's right to use it for Orthodox worship in Georgian.

The Georgian government has largely avoided the issue. Georgian Dream has traditionally acted as a close ally of the Patriarchate at home, but it has not shown the same willingness to back the GOC or defend the country's cultural and religious heritage abroad. On September 27, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze said, "We have no tensions; we have friendly relations with the Azerbaijani government. Based on this friendship, we can easily discuss any topic. It is in this spirit, in a friendly manner, that all issues between the governments of Georgia and Azerbaijan are addressed" (Business Media, September 27). Georgian expert Kakha Gogolashvili called the GOC's statement misguided and imprudent, arguing that it should have raised the matter with the government and that the issue of the two countries' political leadership should have been resolved (Interpressnews, September 28).

The Patriarchate, whose stance objectively favors the Georgian Dream government over the opposition, received support in this conflict precisely from opposition parties. The political party Lelo expressed full support and criticized the Azerbaijani ministry's statement (Facebook/TVPirveli, September 26).

Georgian Dream demonstrates loyalty toward Baku and, in practice, appears to allow Azerbaijan to promote its own historical and cultural interpretation. Azerbaijani-language schools in Georgia use textbooks published in Azerbaijan, which, for example, interpret the history of the region primarily from Baku's perspective. While Azerbaijan consistently promotes its own historical and cultural narrative, Tbilisi, at least publicly, shows no comparable level of activity in protecting Georgia's historical and cultural heritage beyond its present-day borders (Netgazeti, September 8).

In recent years, many sites in Georgia have been named after former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, the first president of Azerbaijan and the father of the country's current president. A public garden in the historic part of Georgia's capital is named after Heydar Aliyev, where his bust has been installed. One of the longest stretches of the city's waterfront is also named after Heydar Aliyev. The state Azerbaijani-language theater in the center of the Georgian capital also bears his name. In addition, several state universities in Georgia have and educational and research spaces at several state universities are also named after him and busts of him have also been installed in several others. Other Georgian cities have also installed busts of Aliyev and named streets and

avenues have been named in his honor. In spring, the Georgian announced plans to build a Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center in the very heart of Tbilisi's historic district, which caused particular controversy. To clear the site for construction, the government decided to initiate expropriation proceedings involving privately owned against property belonging to Georgian citizens (Radio Tavisupleba, April 11).

In Georgia, the Azerbaijani position has provoked a strong public reaction. The controversy is driven not only by the restoration of the Kurmukh Church, but also by how Baku responded to the Patriarchate, one of the country's most influential institutions and one closely connected to the political and social environment supporting Georgian Dream. Ordinary citizens of the two countries had maintained generally good-neighborly rhetoric for many years. A virtual battle erupted on social media on both sides, however, after this incident. Azerbaijani social media users began issuing threats against Georgia and even making territorial claims, while an anti-Azerbaijani campaign also emerged among Georgian users (Facebook/Savashmedia.az, September 27). Some Georgian observers suspect that Russian intelligence services may be behind the escalation, as they could have an interest in worsening relations between the two countries (Facebook/Qaxlilar, September 27; Interpressnews, September 30).

As tensions emerged, the leader of Georgia's pro-Russian Solidarity for Peace party, Mamuka Pipia, saw an opportunity to promote closer ties with Russia. He said he had warned last year about the challenges posed by Azerbaijan and Türkiye and had urged Georgian authorities to form a military-political alliance with Russia to ensure the country's security (Mtavari Now, September 27).

On September 30, a bust of Heydar Aliyev in Tbilisi was vandalized (1news.az, September 30). Georgian law enforcement agencies quickly identified the perpetrators and detained an Armenian citizen who, according to the Georgian authorities, had traveled to Georgia specifically to carry out the vandalism. These developments suggest that various external and domestic actors could have an interest in fueling tensions between Azerbaijan and Georgia. Attempts to provoke conflict between the Azerbaijani authorities and the GOC could ultimately worsen relations between the two countries.

Baku's policy toward Georgia changed sharply after Azerbaijan took full control of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Since then, with strong support from Türkiye, Baku has positioned itself as a middle power and a regional leader (President of Azerbaijan, May 25). This status has given Azerbaijan greater confidence to engage with Georgia not as a strategic partner, but through a language of power, as illustrated by the dispute over transit tariffs. In December 2025, tensions became particularly visible over Georgian transit tariffs on Azerbaijani oil transported through Georgia to Armenia, highlighting growing strains in the bilateral relationship (see EDM, January 29).

Azerbaijan's threats toward Georgia, especially the hints at possible claims concerning allegedly Azerbaijani cultural heritage in Georgia, raise concerns. Given Baku's growing ambitions to position itself as the region's leader, as well as its claims regarding historical heritage within Armenia, Baku's rhetoric may soon include historical arguments asserting that parts of Georgian territory belong to Azerbaijan. This is particularly concerning given that the state border between the two countries has still not been delimited.

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