Both history and borders are not constant. They are often in flux, especially if conflicts can serve some not so hidden agendas.

On 30th July, the self-described “independent” outlet OC media, which also happens to be funded by the Open Society Foundation, released an article stating that only Moscow benefits from rising Tbilisi-Baku tensions, referring to the recent flare up in David Gareja between Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The article begins with an alarmist tone, claiming that there is hateful rhetoric on both sides, and that only the Russian government can benefit from this. But first some background is required on the current disputed area around a 6th Century Monastery, which is on the border between the two countries and is known as the David Gareja Monastery in Georgia and Keşiş Dağ (Priest Mountain) or Keşikçidağ Dağ (Guardian Mountain) in Azerbaijan.

The rightful ownership of this monastery was rarely discussed either during or after the Soviet Union. Not until recently did it become a heated issue, taken advantage of by all sides. Even now it is only fringe nationalist groups and people looking to score political points who are discussing it, but the OC media article makes clear that this will not continue to be the case - foreign contenders have also entered the ring, with far more sinister proposals.
But what do these contenders have which will prove their unsubstantiated claims? No historic reference is given to the root of the problem, which lies in the former USSR, when this disputed territory was split between the Georgian and Azerbaijani SSRs, then ceded to Azerbaijan by Sergo Orjonikidze, who was later killed in Stalin’s purges, as a way of laying ticking time bombs.

Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have things to gain from this dispute. When the article states that ONLY Russia can benefit from it, this gives the impression that this article is shifting blame to another side to hide its own agenda. But it won’t remain hidden for long, based on what we know.

Now is the future

The only thing the authors can cite in support of their rabid claims of rising tensions in the area is a mere two articles on the above-mentioned OC media site. They also find a way to mention Putin and his supposed benefit from the incident, as if he himself is Russia, and this in itself raises flags.

The whole aim of the article and mentioning Russia becomes much clearer towards the end, when the EU and U.S are urged to support Georgia and Azerbaijan in resolving the conflict and curbing Russian influence in the region.

Having spoken with several citizens of Azerbaijan and Georgia, I can confidently state that the issue in the David Gareja complex is one between Azerbaijan and Georgia only, and both are sovereign and independent nations with relatively good relations, capable of negotiating the demarcation of the border, as is planned to take place in August.

But OC media has made my job easier by demonstrating the motives of the two authors.

David J. Kramer is a former Assistant Secretary at the Bureau State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, known for influencing countries under the guise of protecting human rights. He has also written a book about containing Putin’s “regime”, a topic he seems to care deeply about, judging by the article.

Kramer is a war hawk with a great appetite. He favours keeping sanctions on Russia and meeting any challenge to US dominance with swift action.

Richard Kauzlarich, the second author, is a former Ambassador to Azerbaijan and head of the National Intelligence Office for Europe - a man who has spent years influencing Caucasus politics both from the inside and outside.

Both these men have experience of working for the US government, and its intelligence agencies specifically, so they know exactly what their employer’s goals are; pushing US interests in the Caucasus, under the guise of stopping Putin and protecting human rights.

Their articles are stated to be opinion pieces, to give them an excuse for being so brazen with their propaganda efforts. They usually write for smaller, local new sites, to make it seem as if they have a special connection to the reader, rather than being yet more foreign analysts talking down to them about their own countries’ problems.

Bit of History

The David Gareja Monastery Complex is located about 60-70 km southeast of Georgia’s capital Tbilisi. Georgian official information describes it as a Georgian religious and cultural monument. It consists of a number of churches, and has historical significance for Georgians as the foundation of one of the most important Georgian saints and the site of the martyrdom of the last remaining monks in Georgia during the period of Muslim occupation.

David Gareja has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list. The site is characterized by a unique combination of historic architecture and important bio-geographical features. There are dozens of cave monasteries, decorated with unique frescoes, considered excellent examples of the harmonious interaction of manmade structures with a dramatic landscape. They were created on traditional principles of sustainable living and are considered masterpieces of Georgian Medieval art.

The former Soviet government designated the complex part of Azerbaijan. However, upon the collapse Soviet Union the final delimitation of borders was never fully completed.

The alleged facts are: “The delimitation process between Georgia and Azerbaijan on the state border is still ongoing. Commissions of delimitation between the states have agreed on 66 percent of the border, but two percent of the David Gareja monastery complex territory is included in an area whose delimitation has not been agreed, including the cells of the Udabno Monastery and the paths leading to it, for the very simple reason that the above mentioned
percentage of the monastery complex’s territory came under the control of Azerbaijan during the period of the
Soviet Union. Accordingly, the rest of the David Gareja Monastery complex is claimed to be situated on Georgian
territory.”

Azerbaijan didn’t restrict free movement on this territory for many years. However, things have changed in recent
months, as Azerbaijan border guards have told Georgia that they will only let clerics and border guards into the
Udabno Monastery.

It appears that the Government of Georgia raised the monastery issue after information was reported about
Georgian citizens and tourists not being allowed onto the part of the monastery complex now occupied by
Azerbaijan.

I researched this topic back in 2012, when researching information shared by Georgian priests. Since May 6 of that
year Azeri guards have been posted on the part of the monastery complex their country controls, specifically the
Udabno Monastery. They have not allowed some Georgians to enter various sections of the monastery complex, and
visitors are told that the Udabno Monastery is part of an Albanian cultural monument, a contentious claim in the
eyes of most Georgians.

Naturally this issue must be resolved based on the two countries' traditional good-neighbourly and friendly spirits.
However, The former Saakashvili government and its supporters are keen to use media sites as pots to stir in order
to further divide an already divided country.

The dispute had almost entirely died down in Azerbaijan, but an opposition politician made a video a few weeks ago.
General Elçin Quliyev maintained in this that in light of Georgian violations of the border and acts of violence
towards border guards, which include grabbing their weapons, more punitive actions should be taken.

Ali Aliyev, one leader of the Citizens and Progress Party, said in a recent interview with Hamam Times, that a source
who claims to have worked in the border patrol for over a year and a half had strict orders to warn off those
approaching anywhere within 50 metres of the border, first verbally, and then by firing warning shots into the air,
and then finally shoot the intruders if they took no notice and violated the border.

Ali Aliyev is not related to the first family, and Aliyev is the second most popular name in Azerbaijan. The party he
represents is a minor opposition party, demonstrating that the border question is being used by political parties on
both sides for sordid purposes, which is scary in itself.

The purpose of this dispute, and who lies behind it, are clear - to provide an opportunity for friends of the US to
capitalise on the possibility, however slight, that this cherished historic site will be forever lost to future generations
of Georgians thanks to their allegedly “pro-Russian” government. Having failed in Tbilisi with efforts at
destabilization, they are now trying to foment an upheaval in the border regions, amongst people more than happy to
resolve this issue amongst themselves, without outside interference.

Henry Kamens, columnist, expert on Central Asia and Caucasus, exclusively for the online magazine “New
Eastern Outlook”.