

The transformation of ‘grey areas’ at the EU borders: ‘Frozen conflicts’ management through EU tools

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Introduction

Long overlooked, the grey areas scattered in the EU’s proximity after the collapse of the USSR are now undergoing significant transformations due to the advancement of European integration and the retreat of Russian influence. Across the European Union, neighbouring countries have adopted innovative approaches to consolidate national borders by managing “frozen conflicts” using EU instruments. The analysis of the EU-originated instruments is structured along three distinct dimensions, reflecting the particularities of the “frozen conflicts” involving Georgia, Moldova and Armenia. The EU’s contribution to facilitating the reintegration of Georgian national borders consists of monitoring the “moving borders” with Russia-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Moldova’s case, there are intentions to pass to the EU the political and financial role in the conflict settlement. Last but not least, Armenia’s national borders, following the reunification of Karabakh with Azerbaijan, are subject to border upgrades through visa liberalisation and interconnection projects.

The fissures in the leverage of the “frozen conflicts” of Russia

National borders around the “frozen conflicts” in the EU’s neighborhood are no longer Russia’s prerogative. Against the background of the war in Ukraine, the EU voiced its interest in prioritising the security of its borders. The EU’s chief diplomat, Kaja Kallas, articulated the idea that the post-Ukrainian-war European security should include the withdrawal of the Russian military forces from Georgia and Moldova. The understanding that borders require clearing the “grey areas”, which Russia has been protecting with its military presence for three decades since the Soviet Union’s demise, has come to political fruition.

An effective toolbox to make Russian fingerprints vanish from the EU’s borders is in high demand. Yet a single, well-oiled policy for integrating and controlling the “grey areas” is still missing. The high unpredictability of the war in Ukraine delays the crystallisation of a clear-cut, replicable approach to managing the EU’s geopolitical proximity to Russia. Despite the scarcity of anti-“grey area” tools at its disposal, the EU is operating with a diversity of policies to contain, deter or remove Russian influence at its external borders. These now extend as far as the national frontiers of the fresh EU candidate states and potential ones – in Ukraine and Moldova to the East, and in Georgia and, highly likely, in Armenia in the South Caucasus. In Georgia, the EU maintains its Monitoring Mission to register the Russian the unfolding occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia against the attempts of “borderization” by gradually shifting the administrative borders. In the Moldovan direction, the European financial means are deployed to persuade the separatist elites in the Transnistria region, seizing the momentum created by the energy crisis. Finally, the EU operates with its visa liberalisation mechanism and the interconnection projects with Georgia and Azerbaijan to help stabilise the borders. These developments eliminate the remnants of the “frozen conflict” in the reintegrated Nagorno-

Karabakh, which ended in 2024 after serving almost three decades as Moscow's leverage in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict settlement.

These instances of the shrinking of the “grey zone”, where Russian strategic interests in the “near abroad” lie, are pushing Moscow to make adjustments. The reimagination of the Russian possibility resides in a sequencing of ‘soft’ and ‘hard power’ measures. In the first place, the Russian side decided in May 2026 to fast-track the passportisation of residents of Moldova's Transnistrian region. It has also set a deadline for Ukrainians who fled the occupied territories to reclaim their property rights, for which they must obtain Russian citizenship first, with expropriation taking effect after July 2026. The easily granted Russian passports in “grey areas” might serve a propagandistic purpose more than a practical one for their potential owners. The visa-related restrictions imposed by the EU and other partners of Ukraine in the West have devalued Russian passports. Consequently, to compensate for the precarity of Russian passports issued at the borders with the EU, Moscow introduced an extraterritorial, military-oriented element to its foreign policy aimed at protecting its citizens. Starting in 2026, Russia reserves its right to use its military to assist its citizens abroad, be it against physical threats or even if Russian citizens are facing criminal investigation. Through such bold measures, Russia attempts to reposition itself externally, including in relation to the EU, which seeks to dismantle the ‘grey areas’ while Russia is weakened by the war in Ukraine.

Three different approaches of the EU in Georgia, Moldova and Armenia

The approaches the EU employs to address the ‘grey zones’ at its geopolitical borders vary. They are rendered as reactive solutions with creative components. In a constant learning process, the EU adapts its actions to suit the local particularities of the borders it sets through its enlargement policy. The EU has applied its tools with equal dedication, be it to Moldova, a candidate state with open EU accession negotiations; Georgia, with suspended candidate status; or Armenia, a newcomer without any EU accession status, among the states aspiring to join the EU.

The largest involvement the EU has in dealing with the ‘grey zone’ in Moldova. Integration through trade has been one way in which the EU has engaged with businesses in the Transnistrian separatist region. Due to logistical constraints dictated by geopolitical circumstances, companies from the breakaway region export up to 80% of their goods to the EU. The pulling factor created by the access to the market was combined with the EU's financial and energy advantages. Thus, in late 2024, when Kyiv cancelled the transit of Russian gas to the separatist region, the EU stepped in, offering the possibility to import gas for the region's consumption, including financial aid in exchange for concessions, mainly related to human rights. Thus, by taking over the role of ‘crisis co-manager’, the EU gains the ability to counter Russia in its ‘grey zones’ along Eastern borders by *removing* its influence across certain policy areas, such as trade and energy supply.

A different role that the EU can adopt vis-à-vis borders, where the EU envisions actively performing geopolitical border functions, can take the form of its Common Foreign Security Missions. Since 2008, after the war with Russia and the de facto occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU has deployed its EU Monitoring Mission at the administrative borders

(Administrative Boundary Lines) with the two separatist regions. Some aspects that the EU declares as part of the EUMM's mandate are of particular interest. The Mission seeks to build confidence, facilitate the resumption of normal life, and serve as a learning process for the EU across the whole region. All three angles refer to Russia and the 'grey zone' it has built in Georgia, by recognising the independence of the breakaway regions and subsequently militarising them. The Georgian case indicates that when the EU has limited resources, it sticks to more modest goals of de-escalation, which should be understood as a means of *containing* the 'grey area' at its geopolitical borders.

Last example showing the EU's creativity in dealing with 'grey areas' is the intentionality in supporting the normalisation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, after the 2022 second Karabakh. Not only did the EU, through the 2021-2023 mediation of Charles Michel, President of the European Council, nurture dialogue between Yerevan and Baku on a separate track from Russia, but it also demonstrated its readiness to contribute to interconnection projects. In addition to expressing its intent to support the construction of the Trump Route of International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), viewed as part of the 'Middle Corridor', the EU has also launched a visa liberalisation dialogue with Armenia. This landmark decision will reshape how Armenia's borders function, strengthening its sovereignty and eliminating the remnants of Russian influence, making Armenia compatible with EU border norms. With Georgia already integrated into the EU border management *acquis* starting in 2016, Armenia's adherence, which, since late 2025, has been implementing the visa dialogue plan, will expand the geographical scope of the EU rules on border management. This replaces the control that Russia exercised over the Armenian border checkpoints at the borders with Türkiye and Iran, including at the main airport in Yerevan (Zvartnots International Airport). In other words, both the reintegration of Nagorno Karabakh into Azerbaijan and the normalisation process, as well as full establishment of control over national borders, are favouring the EU's deterrence against Russian 'grey areas' in the South Caucasus.

Conclusions

A silent transformation of the 'grey zones' at the EU's geopolitical borders, understood as the national borders of the EU candidate states and newly aspiring states, is taking place. The EU employs different approaches to manage the 'frozen conflicts' in Georgia and Moldova, including by means of efforts to normalise the post-conflict environment, as shown in Armenia. As a result of the EU's actions, Russia has to retreat, putting its weakening influence in its 'near abroad' at risk.

The point at which 'grey zones' will be completely erased in the EU's neighbourhood is far from being within reach in the near future. However, the EU's co-management of the energy crisis in the Transnistrian region, or the use of the visa liberalisation process in Armenia, can produce radical changes towards robust and fully sovereign borders at the intersection of the geopolitical rivalry between the EU and Russia.