

Can Europe Border Russia? A Grassroots Perspective from the “borderlands” (Moldova)

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Core Argument

Europe is no longer deciding whether to border Russia or not, but how to do so under conditions of war, fragmentation, and persistent interdependence. Effective bordering requires reconciling hard security imperatives with the lived realities of borderline societies (not equivalent to the grey-zone or tampon areas). The eastern frontier of the EU is not a fixed line, but a dynamic socio-political process shaped by local actors, constraints, and pressures. Moldova is rather a strategic laboratory than a periphery. Its firsthand experience with Russia suggests that a sustainable European borderland with Russia must be firm and flexible simultaneously, integrating security imperatives with the complex realities of life at the border.

1. A Fractured Post–Cold War Order

Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2015), the war in Ukraine (2022), and sustained direct/military and hybrid (active measures) operations have totally dismantled the one-sided vision of the post-geopolitical, post-ideological, and post-conflict Europe that was assumed after 1990. With unfolding global insecurities, the EU eastern frontier—from the Arctic to the Black Sea—has become a zone of structural conflict, military and economic confrontation, combining high-stakes military risk, nuclear threats, intense cyber insecurity, energy coercion, and information warfare. This transformation is not only geopolitical but systemic: borders are no longer fixed lines between states, but moving targets that involve systemic competition and political regimes that are influenced by intense warfare between various state and non-state actors.

2. Two Europes, One Russia

The EU remains fundamentally divided between a Frontline Europe (Baltics, Poland, Finland, Ukraine, Moldova) that perceives Russia as a genuine existential threat, calling for collective defence, applying deterrence, international sanctions, and strategic decoupling, and a Backline (Rear) Western Europe (France, Italy, Spain, Germany) that tends to approach Russia as a complex but manageable actor. The latter seems to favor selective engagement and economic pragmatism with Russia, accepting that borders can be fluid. This striking divergence funnels divisions and conflicting positions among EU key-actors, where the costs of confrontation are unevenly distributed, and political cohesion remains fragile.

3. Moldova as a Triple Borderland Laboratory

Moldova is not a peripheral case, but a testing ground at the intersection of 3 overlapping regimes: **EU–Russia:** energy dependence, political influence, unresolved Transnistrian conflict (with Russian troops on the ground despite constitutional neutrality). **EU–Ukraine:** war spillovers, refugee flows, safety of the nuclear facilities, trade reorientation, and unlocked militarization of the region. **EU Membership** lacks unanimity, which splits domestic support for reforms, raises populism and corruption risks, and blocks strategic reforms. Moldova’s EU accession path remains strategically significant, but uncertain, constrained by volatile political coalitions in Europe, as well as by low administrative capacity at home, rent-seeking networks, through a de facto one-party system, producing general fatigue and lack of social cohesion. This creates a high-stakes environment where acceleration of reforms risks domestic backlash, while gradualism risks entrenching Russian influence.

4. Transnistria: A Hybrid Security and Social System

Transnistria is not only a frozen conflict but a multi-layered system combining Russian military presence and strategic leverage, informal economic networks, and energy dependency, with fluid political loyalties and adaptive actors. The region functions through a “dual alignment,” where local actors navigate between Russian patronage and European opportunities, but whose legitimacy is always contested. This creates a persistent instability buffer resistant to both full reintegration and external isolation.

5. Grassroots Bordering Practices

Beyond formal policy, borders are actively shaped by societal actors: Civil society and media monitor corruption, track disinformation networks, and expose hybrid influence operations, though their political leverage remains limited. Local businesses sustain cross-border trade and supply chains, often operating within hybrid regulatory environments that bridge EU standards and post-Soviet economic practices. Diaspora networks act as transnational vectors of capital, norms, and political influence, but also reproduce competing orientations toward both the EU and Russia. These actors transform the border into a zone of overlap, where cooperation, resistance, and adaptation coexist.

6. Structural Constraints: Security, Energy, and Information Warfare

Any realistic bordering strategy must account for three critical vulnerabilities: Hard security risks, unresolved conflicts, Russian forward presence, and potential escalation scenarios in the Black Sea region. Energy dependence: continued exposure to external supply shocks and political leverage, despite diversification efforts. Information warfare: entrenched disinformation ecosystems targeting socio-economic grievances and identity divisions. These factors interact with internal weaknesses, including regional inequality, urban–rural divides, and institutional fragility, amplifying political volatility.

7. Dual Strategic Logics: Containment vs. Coexistence

Two approaches shape Europe's response: **Containment**, deterrence, sanctions, and the political isolation of Russia. **Pragmatic coexistence**: selective engagement in trade, energy, and societal exchange. In practice, these logics already coexist on the ground. Border communities simultaneously resist Russian influence and maintain functional linkages necessary for economic and social survival.

8. Toward a Coherent EU Frontier Policy

A viable European strategy should integrate both structural and grassroots realities through: Strategic prioritization of the eastern frontier, recognizing it as a core European security domain, with shared financial responsibility, coordinated risk assessment, and equitable burden-sharing. EU shall address the structural vulnerabilities of borderline states by investing in state capacity, governance reform, and anti-corruption mechanisms in frontline states. This implies energy diversification and reduced dependency on Russian resources. Social cohesion is a key-policy area for both borderline states and EU, both shall be able to develop robust counter-disinformation strategies and support independent media ecosystems. Embed grassroots actors into policymaking through consultative platforms and cross-border governance mechanisms. Finally, the EU shall introduce clearer accession pathways and intermediate integration frameworks to sustain reform momentum and public support. Good governance in the border line states requires keeping democratic systems as the fundamental norms for EU accession, this requires grassroots inclusion in governance, separation of powers, fair and free elections, creating democratic legitimacy, adaptability, and resilience.

9. Moldova's Strategic Lesson

Moldova demonstrates that Europe cannot effectively border Russia without first addressing its own internal contradictions—between East and West, security and economics, idealism and pragmatism. The frontier is not a static line but a dynamic socio-political process, shaped by state power, local agency, and transnational networks. As such, Moldova should be treated not as a margin, but as a policy laboratory for developing a European border that is simultaneously secure, flexible, and socially embedded.

10. Forward Outlook

Future policy must move beyond static frameworks and incorporate scenario-based planning: escalation vs. prolonged hybrid conflict, successful EU integration vs. stalled enlargement, resilience vs. internal fragmentation. Without such forward-looking approaches, Europe risks managing its border reactively rather than strategically.