

Summary

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The traditional concept of a border as a physical line on a map is increasingly obsolete in the context of European-Russian relations. Instead, a “Paper Border” has emerged—a regulatory and administrative frontier defined by passports, property deeds, and graduated forms of citizenship. Through the process of “passportization”, Russia has effectively exported its sovereignty into the domestic spaces of neighbouring states, specifically in Transnistrian region and the Donbas. This brief argues that to “border” Russia effectively, Europe must move beyond simple isolation or recognition. Instead, it must engage in a strategy of legal resilience, providing grassroots populations with alternative legal anchors to prevent their total absorption into the Russian administrative sphere.

Introduction: the concept of the “Paper Border”

For decades, European security has focused on territorial integrity. However, from a grassroots perspective, the border is not a fence or a line on the map, but a document. The “Paper Border” represents the administrative infrastructure that dictates a person’s ability to work, travel, and own land and other property. In the contested zones between Europe and Russia, citizenship has been unbundled from national identity and transformed into a toolkit for survival. Russia’s strategy of mass-issuing passports, a practice known as passportization, is a form of creeping annexation. It creates a demographic reality that Russia eventually uses to justify military “protection” of its citizens abroad, heavily using the concept of the “Ruskiy Mir” (Russian world). For the individual, these documents are often not a sign of loyalty but a necessity to navigate the “legal fog” created by frozen and active conflicts.

Case Study: Transnistria – the experiment of overlapping citizenships

Transnistria offers a long-term view of how overlapping citizenships create a “graduated membership” in society. Since the early 1990s, the grassroots population has lived in a state of permanent legal ambiguity. The Survival Toolkit: Most residents of Transnistria hold a “fan” of passports. A Transnistrian “passport” (internationally unrecognised) is used for local life; a Russian passport is used for pensions and social security; and a Moldovan passport is increasingly used to access the benefits of the EU’s visa-free regime. Some people manage even to have Romanian or Bulgarian passports, also used to access the EU benefits, including access to the EU labour market. The graduated membership creates a hierarchy of rights. Those with only Russian documents are connected to the Russian economy. Those with Moldovan and EU documents have a path to Europe. The “border” here is a filter that determines a person’s socioeconomic mobility, and that has been defined by documents a lot.

At the same time, the property in the Transnistrian region is a captive asset as the property rights are siloed. A home in Tiraspol exists in a legal vacuum. It cannot be used as collateral in a European bank, nor is the deed recognised by the Moldovan state without complex re-registration. This lack of legal interoperability keeps the grassroots population economically dependent on the local de facto authorities and their Russian sponsors. The property issues will eventually become a central element of discussions between the citizens of the occupied region and the authorities in Moldova. The region has been quite unstable lately due to the decreasing ability of Russia to continue sponsoring the so-called Transnistrian

republic. The process of the EU accession of Moldova makes the people residing in the region more prone to “legalise” all their relations with the authorities in Moldova, understanding that, in the future, the EU/Moldova benefits, but also opportunities will be much greater than the ones that Russia offers.

Case Study: The Donbas / other occupied regions in Ukraine – passportization as a tool of dispossession

If Transnistria is the laboratory, then the Donbas is the weaponised application of the instruments that have been developed by Russia for years. Here, the “Paper Border” has been used to facilitate the most rapid and aggressive shift in grassroots demographics in modern European history. Forced Integration: post-2019, and accelerated after the large-scale invasion of 2022, Russia shifted from “offering” passports to “mandating” them. The same happens in other occupied territories in the Zaporizhzhia region or Kherson. In the Donbas, the Russian passport is now the “master key.” Without it, residents are denied healthcare, humanitarian aid, and the right to work.

The property-citizenship trap: property dispossession has become a central mechanism of the Paper Border. Authorities in the occupied territories have implemented policies to identify “ownerless” property—essentially assets belonging to those who fled the war area. To reclaim or protect their homes, residents are often forced to return and re-register their property under Russian law, a process that usually requires the owner to accept Russian citizenship.

At the same time, at the level of the grassroots perspective, it reveals a looming crisis in the property resolution: the clashing deeds. When these territories are eventually reclaimed or settled, there will be two sets of owners for thousands of properties- those with pre-war Ukrainian deeds and those with occupation-era Russian deeds. This legal chaos is a deliberate Russian strategy to make the “re-bordering” of these areas by Europe as painful as possible. Already today, Ukrainians who fled the territory and returned to their homes in occupied regions, were surprised to find out that their home is owned by someone else.

All these developments lead us to the strategic dilemma: How should Europe border Russia? The core question of my report is how Europe can border Russia. In the context of the Paper Border, there are three options: isolation, cooperation, or challenge.

-the failure of Isolation

Isolating the grassroots populations of Transnistria and the Donbas is counterproductive. When Europe makes it difficult for these residents to maintain European-recognised identities (by making Moldovan or Ukrainian documentation processes too bureaucratic or by closing border crossings), it forces them into the Russian administrative embrace. Isolation turns “grey zones” into something where Russia has total control over the information and legal environment. At the same time, there should be a notable exception: those who took part in the Russian war of aggression and who created illegal institutions must be banned from entering the EU and should be denied them and their families access to all that the EU can offer.

-The impossibility of cooperation

Cooperation with the de facto regimes (the Tiraspol or administrations of occupied regions in Ukraine) is a non-starter, as it legitimises the “Paper Border” that Russia is trying to build. Cooperation at the state level effectively cedes the grassroots population to the Russian legal sphere.

-The path forward: challenging through administrative inclusion

The most effective way to border Russia is to challenge its administrative monopoly over these populations. Europe must offer a legal anchor that is more attractive and resilient than the Russian passport.

To effectively border Russia at the grassroots level, European policymakers and their partners in Moldova and Ukraine should think about the following:

- Digital Citizenship and administrative presence: Europe should support the creation of digital legal instruments. If a resident of the occupied regions in Ukraine or Moldovan (less of a case since 96% have MD citizenship) can maintain their Ukrainian or Moldovan citizenship through a secure, mobile-based digital platform (e.g. like Ukraine’s Diia), the Russian “paper border” loses its power. Digital IDs should enable remote registration of births, marriages, and property deeds, ensuring that the individual remains anchored in a European legal framework.

- Decoupling services from recognition: we should find ways to provide grassroots services—such as educational accreditation and healthcare coordination that do not require the recognition of the occupying regimes but do recognise the residency of the individual. This prevents Russia from being the sole provider of social stability.

3. Proactive property registries: a European property registry for occupied areas should be established. Using satellite imagery and blockchain technology, Ukraine and Moldova (with EU support) should maintain live registries of property in occupied regions. This allows refugees and residents to flag their property in a European-recognised system before it is seized or re-registered by occupying forces, laying the groundwork for future restitution and challenging the finality of Russian dispossession.

- Redefining the status in the occupied regions: Europe should move toward a person-centric in addition of territory-centric, legal policy. This means recognising that a person may hold a Russian passport out of coercion while maintaining their European rights. We must avoid the “loyalty test” and focus on providing a legal off-ramp for those who have been passportized against their will.

Conclusion

The border between Europe and Russia is currently being fought over in the wallets and filing cabinets of the people living in Transnistria and the Donbas. Russia understands that if you control a person’s papers and their home, you control their future. To border Russia, Europe cannot simply build a wall. It must compete for the administrative loyalty of the grassroots. By providing robust, digital, and accessible alternatives to Russian passportization and property dispossession, Europe can ensure that its border is defined by the protection of individual rights rather than the projection of imperial power. The goal is to ensure that for a resident of the borderlands, the European passport is always more valuable, more secure, and more representative of their future than the Russian one. This is how we border Russia—by making the Russian administrative project obsolete at the grassroots level.