

Perspectives from the Other Side: Borders and Border-Making in Georgia's Occupied Areas

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Introduction

Since the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, the line of contact separating Georgia proper from Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia has undergone a gradual process of “borderization.” Through the deployment of Russian border service, the installation of physical barriers, and the ongoing efforts to regulate cross-boundary movement, the line of contact has increasingly transformed into a de facto border that defines political and social realities on ground. At the same time, Russian and local authorities have sought to legitimize these boundaries through official narratives that present them as necessary and natural frontiers. As a result, what was previously a hardly visible and tangible administrative line has now become a heavily securitized zone that separates communities, restricts movement, and reinforces competing claims of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and geopolitical belonging.

This paper examines this very process. It explores both the material and discursive dimensions of border-making in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. More specifically, it studies major developments associated with the borderization process since 2008, also exploring how Russian and de facto actors frame and justify these processes in official statements, legal documents, and analytical discourse.

By examining how these actors construct and interpret the dividing line across legal, physical, and cognitive domains, the paper contributes to a better understanding of the foundations that underpin Russia’s presence in Georgia’s occupied territories. The paper also sheds light on how Moscow constructs, legitimizes, and attaches political meaning to newly established boundaries in territories under its control, offering insights into a broader pattern of Russian practice beyond the Georgian case.

Background

Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia emerged as a point of conflict in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR. The region broke away from Tbilisi in the early 1990s after brief hostilities between government forces and local insurgent groups. Although active conflict subsided after a ceasefire agreement in 1992, the region remained outside the control of the Georgian government and existed in a prolonged state of political and legal uncertainty. The de facto authorities established control over most of the territory with substantial backing from Russia, yet the region’s status remained internationally unrecognized.

For more than a decade, the conflict remained largely dormant, but was characterized by periodic spikes in tension. This unstable status quo eventually changed in August 2008, when a series of low-intensity skirmishes escalated into a full-scale war between Georgia and Russia. The five-day war resulted in the consolidation of Russia’s military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the recognition of both areas by Moscow as independent states, and the establishment of a new security environment on the ground. Moscow’s recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia has had several implications for both Russia and the two regions. One of these implications was the need to translate political recognition into territorial consolidation on the ground. In particular, Russia’s decision to recognize the statehood of these entities meant that the Kremlin now had to contribute to and invest in key attributes of sovereignty, including the establishment and institutionalization of state borders. These efforts to “formalize” new borders and

delineate the territories under its control have been especially complex in the case of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

First, there is the question of which boundary should have served as a reference point. Since 1922, when the Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia was established within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, the region's boundaries were adjusted several times. As a result, the territorial configuration that had taken shape by the late Soviet period differed from that of the early Soviet years. Second, the territorial situation on the ground in the pre-2008 period was highly fluid. Georgian authorities retained control over substantial portions of territory within the former autonomous oblast - estimated at around 35-40%¹ - while clear and consistently marked dividing lines were largely absent. In many cases, these zones of control were interwoven in a patchwork configuration, with no clear signs of separation.

Then there was the question of population movement. The absence of clearly defined boundaries in the pre-2008 period meant that nearly all residents of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia could move with relative ease between areas under Tbilisi's administration and under Tskhinvali's control, as well as Georgia proper. In the aftermath of the 2008 war, this permeability was significantly reduced, and most ethnic Georgians were displaced from areas inside the region. However, in some localities they remained in sizable numbers, necessitating the introduction and enforcement of travel regulations across hitherto non-existent borders. This was particularly sensitive given the continued presence of ethnic Georgian populations in parts of the territory, most notably in the Akhagori district in the east, which remained majority-Georgian even after the conflict, as well as in the Sinaguri/Qardzmani zone towards the west.

Constructing the boundary: the legal domain

From the Kremlin's point of view, the 2008 war and its aftermath created not only a new security environment but also a legal necessity to formalize the territorial outcomes of the conflict. Following the recognition of South Ossetia on August 26, 2008, Moscow presented its engagement with Tskhinvali as part of its lawful interstate relations with a newly recognized state. This framing was reflected in the ["Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance"](#) signed in September 2008.

Similarly, the institutionalization of the boundary was presented as the clarification and fortification of a state border between Russia's partner South Ossetia, on the one hand, and Georgia on the other. Subsequent bilateral agreements between the Kremlin and the de facto authorities, particularly the one concluded in 2009 on coordinated efforts in ["border protection,"](#) further formalized the role of the Russian Federation in securing what was defined as the "state border" of South Ossetia with Georgia.

In this context, what was formerly a loosely-defined space between opposing sides was reconfigured as an international boundary requiring regulation and enforcement mechanisms typical of state borders. The deployment of border units, the establishment of checkpoints, the installation of physical barriers, and the routine detentions of locals were thus presented as administrative and security necessities. Importantly, this legal-institutional construction was also reinforced through gradual normalization of administrative practices. The new crossings were regulated through entry procedures, documentation requirements, and periodic closures, all in line with standard border management practices.

¹ Prior to 2008, Tbilisi controlled parts of the Znauri/Kornisi (the villages of Nuli, Avnevi and adjacent areas), Tskhinvali (Greater and Lesser Liakhvi gorges), and Akhagori (villages in Ksani Valley and the town of Akhagori) districts, which broadly corresponded to areas populated by ethnic Georgians. Additionally, in several other areas, including the Sinaguri/Qardzmani zone, authority was not consistently exercised by any of the sides. There were also no-man's-land areas in certain locations.

As a result, the new boundary was formalized through a complex legal framework that included bilateral treaties and administrative enforcement mechanisms. The Russian side spared particular efforts to portray its role as deriving from a mandate granted by the South Ossetian authorities rather than from unilateral Russian action. Thus, when the first signs of borderization appeared in early 2009, the Russian authorities [emphasized](#) that “the legitimate authorities of the independent sovereign state of South Ossetia are entitled to manage and secure their border with neighboring states in accordance with their national security interests.” Similarly, the agreement on “border protection” from 2009 states that responsibility for protecting the state border was delegated to the Russian Federation by South Ossetia. In this way, the construction and policing of the boundary were framed as exercises of South Ossetian state sovereignty, even as they relied heavily on Russian personnel, resources, and institutional backing. Importantly, however, the issue of exact border configuration was left largely unaddressed by Moscow. Neither the “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance”, nor the agreement on “border protection” specify where the “state border” lies². In practice, Russia has relied on available Soviet-era cartographic materials, including military maps from the 1980s, as a basis for the border-making.

Constructing the boundary: the physical domain

No border is a border until it is enforced in practice. Accordingly, once the relevant legal frameworks were put in place, the Kremlin moved to establish signs of physical presence along the edges of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. The process of border-making unfolded in several overlapping phases.

The first step in this process was the deployment of personnel. Following the 2008 war, the line of contact was initially controlled by regular military units, but from mid-2009, units of the Border Service of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) assumed responsibility for guarding the frontier between South Ossetia and Georgia proper. In the subsequent years, around two dozen outposts were established along the line, equipped with observation posts, personnel barracks, and communication facilities. The officers soon began conducting regular patrols. Simultaneously, the Russian FSB, alongside local authorities, embarked on the physical demarcation of the boundary. Fences, barbed wire, border signs, surveillance equipment, and other markers gradually appeared along the line of contact³.

These new physical barriers were [felt](#) particularly acutely by those who live close to the boundary line. In many locations, these installations appeared in areas previously controlled by Tbilisi, or where [no visible](#) boundary had existed beforehand. Open fields, orchards, pastures, and village outskirts that had long served as shared or accessible spaces were affected by these new physical barriers. Soon, reports began to emerge of Georgian villagers being apprehended for alleged violations of the state border⁴.

Most were released after paying fines, but for many locals this was their first encounter with the practical consequences of borderization. Activities that had long been part of everyday life - cultivating fields, tending livestock, visiting relatives, or collecting firewood - were suddenly recast as cross-border movements subject to regulation. As a result, the boundary became a tangible feature of daily routine.

² South Ossetian legislation is likewise unclear on this issue. While independence was officially [declared](#) within the borders of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, the legislation does not provide a precise definition of the territory to which this claim applies.

³ The Georgian authorities [estimated](#) in 2020 that approximately 53 kilometers of the 353-kilometer administrative boundary of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia had been reinforced with physical barriers.

⁴ According to Georgian authorities, between 2009 and 2019, around 1,330 Georgian villagers [were detained](#) for alleged border violations. It is widely assumed that the number is far bigger.

Importantly, the absence of precision regarding the exact course of the boundary meant that the Kremlin could project it flexibly on the ground, in line with its subjective security and political considerations. This played out most visibly in the cases of the village of Perevi immediately after the 2008 war, and later in several other areas along the line, including Khurvaleti, Dvani, and [Tsnelisi/Chorchana](#), where disagreements over the location of the line led to dangerous standoffs with Georgian law enforcement⁵.

Constructing the boundary: the cognitive domain

The post-2008 formation of the South Ossetian boundary should be understood not only as a physical process of separation, but also as a discursive reconfiguration of what constitutes a “border.”

In official Kremlin and South Ossetian narratives following the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, the border is [anchored](#) in the administrative boundary line of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. This interpretive pattern is evident in repeated rhetorical and legal references to the idea that the territory of the state of South Ossetia is “defined within the borders of the former autonomous oblast,” a formulation intended to portray the post-2008 boundary not as a newly-created territorial construct but as the restoration of an already existing political-geographical unit⁶.

At the same time, South Ossetian narratives are not confined to the administrative boundaries of the former autonomous oblast. They also draw on ethno-territorial imaginaries that transcend the Soviet-era boundaries. Frequent emphasis on the division of the Ossetian people across the Russian-Georgian border, as well as [references](#) to territories inside Georgia proper - such as the so-called “Eastern Ossetia” or “Trialeti Ossetia” blurs the distinction between official boundaries and claimed ethnonational space.

The discursive construction of the border has also involved a process of securitization, whereby the boundary is framed primarily in light of threats and danger. Official and semi-official discourse frequently links border formation to the [prevention](#) of renewed violence, the [protection](#) of a “small nation” from annihilation, and the [containment](#) of instability emanating from Georgia. In addition, there are frequent assertions that NATO and other Western actors seek to strengthen their positions at Russia’s borders, alongside [claims](#) about western-supported militarization on the Georgian side. Combined, this contributes to a securitized perception in which the need for physical separation is depicted as a defensive response rather than a purely administrative act.

The meaning of the boundary is also embedded in broader geopolitical narratives that positions South Ossetia within a wider regional security context. In official Russian discourse, the border is frequently [presented](#) not merely as a line separating two political entities, but as a [key component](#) of stability and security in South Caucasus as a whole. Russian officials have repeatedly [argued](#) that the deployment of border guards on the South Ossetian boundary constitute a “guarantee of stability and security” not only for South Ossetia but for the wider region. The protection of South Ossetian borders is also framed as contributing directly to Russia’s own security, with Russian officials [maintaining](#) that, by guarding South Ossetia’s frontiers, Russia is simultaneously [strengthening](#) its southern borders in the Caucasus region.

⁵ The uncertainty about the exact border configuration also [led](#) to internal political debates in Tskhinvali, with various factions [accusing](#) de facto leader Anatoly Bibilov of having ceded territory. In particular, critics [argued](#) that by not adhering to administrative boundaries established in 1922, he [had](#) effectively “lost” a significant area of land to Georgia. Bibilov himself, in the context of the 2019 Tsnelisi-Chorchana crisis, [referenced](#) the 1922 map as a point of departure for territorial claims, but [noted](#) later that strict adherence to the 1922 map would in practice place certain areas outside South Ossetian jurisdiction.

⁶ At the same time, this reliance on Soviet-era administrative boundaries sits uneasily alongside another recurring narrative that criticizes Georgia for selectively invoking Soviet territorial arrangements vis-à-vis its former autonomies.

These points are frequently echoed by local officials, who [maintain](#) that Russia's presence provides a guarantee of stability both for [South Ossetia](#) and for the South Caucasus region [more broadly](#). Alongside these dominant security framings, border-making is also [presented](#) as a necessary attribute of sovereignty, with borderization practices portrayed as standard features of "civilized" statehood.

Conclusions and implications

This paper has examined the post-2008 transformation of the line of contact in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia into a de facto state border, showing that border-making cannot be reduced to a purely material process. Rather, it shows that the process unfolds across three interrelated domains - legal, physical, and cognitive - through which the Kremlin has sought to consolidate a new territorial reality on the ground.

In the legal domain, the boundary was formalized through bilateral treaties, security agreements, and administrative practices that redefined the post-war status quo as an interstate relationship. In the physical domain, borderization was implemented through the deployment of Russian border forces, the installation of infrastructure, and the regulation of movement along the line of contact. In the cognitive domain, the boundary was legitimized through narratives that portrayed it as a lawful and necessary international border. This included anchoring it in the Soviet-era administrative boundaries, embedding it within securitized discourses of threat and protection, and situating it in broader geopolitical narratives of regional and global confrontation. Together, these elements constructed the border not as an externally imposed phenomenon but as a sovereign and historically grounded spatial arrangement.

The geopoliticization of the South Ossetian border deserves closer scrutiny. Specifically, it suggests that borders and border-making do not merely redraw lines of territorial jurisdiction, but actively produce geopolitical spaces in which new contours of identity, perception, and belonging are conceived and reinforced. In the case examined here, the boundary is firmly embedded within wider regional narratives that frame border-making as part of an ongoing confrontation between competing global powers. This case demonstrates how border-making can transform a small territory into a space of contestation, where competing understandings of sovereignty, statehood, and geopolitical orientation coexist.

One long-term implication of this is that such practices may not be confined to this specific case, but may also inform how other Russian-controlled or Russian-claimed territories are governed, including in Ukraine, where similarly ambiguous legal statuses and securitized justifications are advanced by the Kremlin. Over time, this might point to the potential diffusion of border-making as a governance logic of Russia, one in which indistinct boundaries are rendered operational through a combination of force, practice, and narrative stabilization, even in the absence of a durable political settlement on both sides.

Lastly, this raises the question of how states, scholars, and international actors should respond to these emerging semi-official border regimes. While any durable resolution ultimately depends on broader geopolitical change, an important starting point is to look beyond the frontier itself. Studying the social and political dynamics that surround and sustain these boundaries can reveal both their foundations and their limits. This discussion paper contributes only a small part to that broader research agenda, but it highlights the importance of understanding borderization not simply as a territorial outcome, but as an ongoing process through which geopolitical division is produced, legitimized, and maintained over time.