



# Deterring Russia's Borderization of Georgia

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*"In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template."*

– General Valery Gerasimov,  
Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation

The guns ceased firing in August 2008. However, the war never truly ended. Nine years later, Russian troops still occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in violation of the [Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement](#). In 2013, Russia began seizing additional Georgian territory in a process called "borderization."

Borderization specifically refers to the installation of border markers, fencing, and barbed wire along the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs) that separate Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia.

In a series of incidents beginning in the [Spring of 2013](#), Russian soldiers and ethnic Ossetian militia have installed barbed wire fencing around South Ossetia, moving the ABL deeper into Georgian territory and seizing pieces of territory hitherto administered by Tbilisi.

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The [July 4](#) incident was one of the most flagrant. According to local reports, Russian soldiers installed new border markers and in the process moved the ABL roughly 700 meters deeper into Georgian territory.

Borderization has grave [human costs](#). When barbed wire fences are put up, freedom of movement is restricted. Villages and even individual plots of land are separated. Individuals lose access to their homes and farmland. In many cases, residents of the occupied territories are prevented from accessing healthcare and other essential public services.

Just as bad, local residents are regularly kidnapped by guards encroaching onto Tbilisi-controlled territory. In a highly-visible form of extortion, detainees are kept in harsh conditions – often on Russian military bases in the occupied territories – until a friend or family member can pay the [required fine](#) of roughly 2,000 rubles.

### **Why Russia Borderizes Georgia:**

From the Russian perspective, borderization serves four main objectives. All undermine Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

#### **Moving the ABLs moves the Russian Armed Forces deeper into Georgia.**

According to Edward Boyle, borderization [changes the situation](#) on the ground to “*materialize an administrative fiction.*” By building physical barriers, Russia consolidates its occupation of Georgian territory.

Moreover, moving the ABLs deeper into Georgian territory serves a tactical purpose. It allows the Russian Armed Forces to more easily threaten key infrastructure such as the Baku-Supsa natural gas pipeline and the East-West Highway. It can also more easily menace major population centers, including Tbilisi.

That is the direct military motivation behind borderization. The real prize is political, however.

#### **Borderization demoralizes Georgia's society and undermines its government.**

The ABLs are not legally-recognized borders. However, because the process of borderization makes them look, feel, and operate like real borders, they have the psychological effect of borders.

The Georgian public is outraged each time a new instance of borderization occurs. The outrage is mostly directed against Russia, but some is targeted at their own government.

Many Georgians view the current government as weak and ineffectual on matters of foreign policy, largely due to its inability to respond assertively to borderization. According to a [June 2017 poll](#) by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), only 16% of Georgians said they trusted the current ruling party to effectively manage the issue. By contrast, 40% said they trusted no party.

This plays into Russia's hands: Injecting anxiety into Georgian society disrupts the normal functioning of government and interferes in the country's democratic development. That weakens state and society, making it more difficult to withstand Russian pressure.

This approach is spelled out in recent Russian military doctrine. A 2014 article by General Valery Gerasimov titled "The Value of Science is in the Foresight" expressed a series of ideas later nicknamed "[The Gerasimov Doctrine](#)." The doctrine emphasizes the use of non-military means to disrupt and subvert opposing states:

*"The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."*

Gerasimov continues:

*"Asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use ... Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entirety of the enemy state."*

Borderization, pursuant to the Gerasimov Doctrine, recognizes that war is simply a means to a political end—in this case, subversion of the Georgian state. Non-violent tactics are in fact preferable because they incur fewer costs. Russia is able to conduct warfare against Georgia without firing a single shot.

The slow—"creeping"—pace of borderization allows Russia to have its cake and eat it too: It is able to de facto annex Georgian territory and, because it does so gradually and without violence, avoid backlash by the Georgian government and its western allies.

Georgian and NATO officials recall the catastrophe of last time Georgia used force to resolve its territorial disputes. They are understandably risk averse, and the gradual tempo of borderization accommodates passivity.

The strategy is rooted in "reflexive control theory", another Russian military doctrine. According to the [2004 definition by Timothy L. Thomas](#), reflexive control refers to "*means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.*"

Put simply, that means manipulating the enemy's decision-making processes. Russia did this effectively in 2008, ratcheting up pressure to (successfully) provoke the Georgian

government into using military force in South Ossetia. Now, it's using borderization to muddle Georgia's response to the occupation.

### **It impedes NATO integration.**

The Georgian public overwhelmingly favors NATO membership. NATO is viewed as a protector, a powerful military alliance that can help Georgia defend its borders against Russian aggression.

There's a catch, however. According to the accession criteria set out in the [1995 Study on NATO Enlargement](#), any territorial disputes must be resolved before membership can become possible:

*"States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles."*

The disputes with the occupied territories must be resolved before Georgia and NATO can get serious about membership. By solidifying the separatist status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, borderization directly impedes NATO integration.

Borderization also erodes public confidence in the NATO Alliance. Each time Russia deepens its occupation and NATO fails to assertively respond, the public becomes more woken to an inconvenient truth: The Alliance is largely unable to help Georgia restore its territorial integrity.

Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, Georgia's State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, said in a recent panel discussion that Russia's occupation of Georgian territory is "a strategy of division and disintegration of Europe." In that view, Russia's actions in Georgia are the localization of a broader campaign against the NATO.

### **Borderization disrupts the process of reconciliation and peaceful reintegration.**

The Georgian Dream government has embraced the reality that any policy to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the larger Georgian state must be peaceful. The government has focused on [providing carrots](#), not sticks: Ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians – even those holding Russian passports – are offered free access to healthcare and other public services. The government has also promised to share all the benefits of EU integration with residents of the occupied territories.

Still, efforts at reconciliation and peaceful reintegration are swimming against the current. Public [opinion polls](#) conducted within the occupied territories reveal very little support for reintegration.

The process is made more difficult by the physical isolation imposed by borderization. Movement across the ABLs is severely restricted and the situation is worsening. By limiting person-to-person contacts and preventing residents of the occupied territories from accessing public services, borderization deepens Georgia's estrangement from its ethnic minority populations. People who don't know each other can't be expected to live together.

### **End Games:**

Borderization isn't just a threat to Georgia, it poses security and economic problems for the entire region. These are the logical outcomes of continued borderization.

### **Russia will have a permanent military presence on Georgian territory.**

The Russian Federation signed agreements in "alliance and integration" with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The Russian Armed Forces is currently in the process of merging local military units into its own command structure (as it's doing with [Armenia's armed forces](#)).

If borderization continues unabated, Russia will have a larger and more permanent military force stationed deep in Georgian territory, able to assault Tbilisi at a moment's notice. It has that capability already, but currently there's still hope the occupation can be lifted.

A permanent Russian military occupation creates permanent regional instability, as war could break out at any time.

### **The South Caucasus East-West Transit Corridor could be interrupted.**

This is where the regional implications get real. Georgia is an important corridor for the East-West transit of freight, oil, and natural gas. Its importance as an infrastructure hub will grow further if China seriously engages with the region under its Belt and Road Initiative.

Russia could easily put an end to all that. The ABL with South Ossetia currently passes over the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline (formally called the "Western Export Route Pipeline"). With a capacity of 145,000 barrels per day, the pipeline is an important supplement to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that passes through southern Georgia.

What's more, according to reports, following the most recent instance of borderization the ABL with South Ossetia is now just 400 meters from the East-West Highway, Georgia's main traffic artery. If renewed conflict were to break out, that highway could be easily cut and the country's transport system paralyzed.

Some scholars have argued that Russia's ultimate goal in the South Caucasus is to destroy it as an alternative transit route, creating a [Russian monopoly](#) over East-West overland trade. David J. Smith poses the fundamental question about the region's future:

*"Will he [Putin] succeed in reestablishing the Caucasian isthmus as a land-bridge between Russia and Western Asia, particularly Moscow's clients in Iran and Syria? Or will the Corridor continue to become a history-altering portage between Europe and Central Asia? Putin wants the former and fears the potential of the latter."*

Even if Russia refrains from invading Georgia proper and doesn't cut off the South Caucasus East-West Corridor, its permanent occupation would give it a degree of veto power over future infrastructure developments.

This poses a problem for the countries of the region but also for the European Union (EU), The United States (U.S.), and China. The EU depends on the transit route to deliver oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Central Asia; The U.S. envisions the South Caucasus as a democratic, pro-western outpost in a troubled region; and China views it as a launching pad to get its goods to market in Europe.

All three major powers have an interest in limiting Russia's presence in the South Caucasus. All three should be willing to take steps to increase the costs of borderization.

### **What are Georgia's Allies to Do?**

Borderization continues because the strategic calculus behind it has held true. Russia takes actions large enough to create local disruption but small enough to avoid international backlash. Until real costs are imposed on Russia, its actions are likely to continue.

Georgia's government must more assertively lobby support from its western allies, especially the U.S. That's crucial, because Georgia lacks the military capability to deter borderization by itself. For its part, the U.S. must ensure that the policy imposes costs on Russia. Targeted sanctions are an option. The West should treat Russian violations of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity like it treats similar violations against Ukraine – illegal and unacceptable.

Moreover, the West should increase calls to allow European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) officials access to the occupied territories. Russia's actions should be made more transparent and more attention should be drawn to its refusal to uphold the 2008 ceasefire agreement.

Additionally, the U.S. and EU should take efforts to bolster confidence in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Responding more assertively to further instances of borderization would go

a long way, as would more frequent visits by high-profile officials, such as the January 2017 visit by U.S. Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Amy Klobuchar.

Providing support for reconciliation and peaceful reintegration would also be a positive step. Georgia's western allies could provide financial support for public services aimed at residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Internally-displaced Persons (IDPs).

Georgia's government must do more to raise the issue internationally. For their part, Georgia's allies must step up and provide support when and where it's needed.

### **Timeline of Events**

[August 15-16, 2008](#): Georgian and Russian authorities sign a six-point ceasefire agreement to end the August 2008 War. Despite the agreement mandating that Russia's armed forces "be pulled back on the line, preceding the start of hostilities", Russia continues to occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the war.

[June-September 2013](#): Russian soldiers and Ossetian militia install barbed wire fencing near the villages of Ditsi and Khurvaleti along the ABL separating South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. The Russian military cites a map dating from 1922 that places the village of Ditsi in South Ossetia.

[November 24, 2014](#): The Russian government and Abkhazia's de facto authorities sign an agreement on "Alliance and Integration" which includes a collective defense clause and provisions on "establishment of the joint group of troops."

[March 18, 2015](#): The Russian government signs a similar agreement on "Alliance and Integration" with South Ossetia's de facto authorities.

[July 13, 2015](#): Russian soldiers install border markers along the ABL with South Ossetia, moving the ABL several hundred meters deeper into Georgian territory. A 1,600-meter section of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline is incorporated into Russian-occupied South Ossetia.

[May 19, 2016](#): Georgian citizen Giga Otkhozoria is shot and killed by an Abkhaz guard in the village of Kurcha on the Tbilisi-controlled side of the ABL.

[March 2017](#): Abkhazia's de facto government closes two crossings on the ABL. The only public crossing that remains open is the bridge across the River Enguri. The closures further restrict freedom of movement and create obstacles to receiving medical treatment and other essential public services.

[June 19, 2017](#): Russian soldiers erect border markers near the village of Bershueti which straddles the ABL separating South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. According to EUMM monitors, the border markers are placed on the Russian-occupied side of the ABL.

[July 4, 2017](#): Russian soldiers install barbed wire fencing and border markers on the Tbilisi-controlled side of the ABL near the village of Bershueti. According to local reports, the ABL is moved 700 meters deeper into Georgian territory.

## GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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