



Frozen Conflicts in the EU's Neighborhood: Enlargement With or Without De Facto States?

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Summary

- * *Post-2022 EU enlargement offers candidate status to Moldova and Georgia despite unresolved territorial conflicts, hoping to catalyze reintegration of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Yet these de facto states are strategic actors, not Russian “puppets.” Their distinct hedging strategies reveal why enlargement without security guarantees risks importing frozen conflicts—with Russia—into the EU itself.*

Background/Challenges

- Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered a geopolitical quantum leap: the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—all with unresolved territorial disputes. Georgia retains candidate status, but accession talks stalled amid its government's democratic backsliding and rapprochement with Moscow. Brussels hopes the accession process will serve as a catalyst for reintegrating breakaway regions. Yet EU enlargement now operates as a tool of geopolitical “demarcation” rather than normative transformation—drawing borders against Russian influence.
- The breakaway regions differ sharply in their tractability. South Ossetia is fully bandwagoning with Russia, almost entirely dependent on Moscow, and largely inaccessible to researchers. This analysis therefore focuses on Abkhazia and Transnistria—both unrecognized by the EU but responding in strikingly opposite ways to the post-2022 environment.
- Past precedents warn against optimism. Cyprus joined the EU divided in 2004; membership institutionalized partition, deepening Turkish Cypriot reliance on Ankara. Since Russia is the patron of both Transnistria and Abkhazia, enlargement without conflict resolution risks importing Russian military leverage inside EU borders.

KEY FINDINGS

De facto states hedge—in opposite directions

- ◇ Both Transnistria and Abkhazia retain agency despite deep dependence on Russia. Rather than simply bandwagoning or balancing, they practice “strategic hedging”—maintaining deliberately ambiguous positions to preserve fallback options. Yet their strategies diverge sharply: Transnistria aligns transactionally with EU markets while maintaining a pro-Russian identity; Abkhazia articulates European values and an independence-oriented multi-vector culture while deepening its tactical alliance with Russia.

Transnistria: maintaining status quo while surviving through Europe

- ◇ Since 2022, Transnistria is geographically landlocked: Ukraine closed its border; Russia failed to establish a land corridor. Trade now routes entirely through Moldova and EU-linked systems.
- ◇ In 2025, Kyiv stopped Russian gas transits. Tiraspol rejected the EU's €60 million energy-crisis offer—which required adopting some EU rules—and rerouted gas via a Hungarian trader backed by Russian guarantees. Europe keeps the economy running; Russia provides identity and protection. A textbook example of hedging that preserves double dependency.
- ◇ The dominant Sheriff oligarchic network benefits from the opacity of non-recognition and resists reintegration with Moldova—especially given Chişinău's new anti-corruption reforms. For Transnistrian elites, the status quo is profitable; neither Eurasian integration nor reintegration with Moldova serves their interests.



KEY FINDINGS (continued)

Abkhazia: isolated, dependent, and wary of all sides

- ◇ Abkhazia's "European moment" closed after the 2008 war. Western inaction, Georgia's law on occupied territories restricting international access, and the EU's alignment with Tbilisi's status position left it internationally isolated and structurally dependent on Moscow.
- ◇ This dependency persists despite widespread resistance to Russian absorption—most dramatically in 2024 mass protests that forced the resignation of President Bzhania after he appeared to accommodate Moscow's demands on property law and the "foreign agents" bill.
- ◇ Abkhaz civil society paradoxically welcomes the prospect of Georgia joining the EU—not as a path to reintegration, but as a safeguard for an independent Abkhazia. Georgian EU membership would constrain Tbilisi from military action; the EU would pressure to ease restrictions on Abkhazia. This position is shaped by the post-2022 Tbilisi-Moscow rapprochement, which Abkhaz read as a potential threat: a deal brokered over their heads that could impose reunification on Abkhazia against its will.
- ◇ The suspension of Georgia's EU accession talks deepened Abkhaz uncertainty. Even though Moscow recognized Abkhaz independence in 2008, with Russian troops partially redeployed to Ukraine, Moscow's commitment to Abkhaz security is less credible. Fears of vulnerability to Georgian claims have intensified. Abkhazia looks increasingly toward the Global South for recognition—a multi-vector aspiration in an ever more constrained geopolitical field.

Commonalities

- ◇ Neither de facto state will abandon hedging without credible commitments. This implies that Russia does not need to win the war in Ukraine to retain influence through frozen conflicts. Without a strategy that addresses security and status, EU enlargement will produce "managed instability."

Policy Implications

- Engagement without recognition must be context-driven. In Abkhazia, the priority is decoupling civil society engagement from status politics, pressing Tbilisi to allow contact. Restricting access and mobility undermines trust.
- In Transnistria, Chişinău's new leverage should be used carefully. Rapid reintegration risks destabilizing Moldova given Russian security/military structures and a largely Russophile population. The security impasse is real: Russian withdrawal is Chişinău's precondition; Russian presence is Tiraspol's guarantee. Resolution ultimately depends on Moscow.
- In both cases, EU policy should think of integrating people, not only territory. Accession offers a genuine horizon of hope. The point is to pursue it with de facto state realities in mind—thinking with Tiraspol and Sukhum/i, not only from Brussels, Chişinău, or Tbilisi, so that EU enlargement does not merely freeze dividing lines in place.

Further Reading

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