

“BORDERIZATION” AS A TOOL OF GRAY ZONE WARFARE: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

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Received April 15, 2025; Revised November 1, 2025; Accepted December 9, 2025.

Abstract

This article analyzes “borderization” in Georgia – the process of unilaterally erecting physical barriers and control regimes along administrative lines with Abkhazia and the former South Ossetian Autonomous District – through the prism of the concept of gray zones. The study answers the question: how does the process of borderization contribute to the institutionalization of legal and spatial uncertainty, and to what extent can it be interpreted as a form of gray zone tactics? Based on a critical synthesis of military-strategic, institutional, and operational approaches, this study proposes a working definition of gray zones as sustainable regimes of coercion below the thresholds of war, characterized by difficult attribution of the source of actions and controlled escalation. The analysis is based on policy documents, reports from international organizations, and long-term field observation (2009–2024). The findings demonstrate that borderization functions as a gray zone regime through legal ambivalence, spatio-temporal transformation, and their informational articulation. This regime ensures territorial control without open war or formal annexation. The conceptual contribution consists in defining the minimum core of gray zones as applied to territorial conflicts and identifying the structural connection between gray zones and border areas.

Keywords: borderization; gray zones; territorial conflicts; legal ambivalence; spatial control; Russia; Georgia; South Ossetia; Abkhazia

DOI: 10.14712/23363231.2026.3

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Introduction

Contemporary borders are increasingly becoming the subject of attempts to change them not through war, but via ambiguous practices below the threshold of open military action. One such practice has been called “borderization,” which involves the gradual strengthening of dividing lines by installing physical and symbolic structures and introducing administrative procedures. In Georgia, this term refers to the process by which the so-called administrative boundary lines (ABL) with Abkhazia and the former South Ossetian Autonomous District (SOAD) are subject to unilateral attempts to turn them into state borders through actions aimed at strengthening separation and restricting mobility on the ground. In this article, the case of Georgia is examined in the context of the “gray zone,” a concept used to describe spaces where actors deliberately blur traditional definitions of war, peace, and sovereignty. Although this concept is most developed in military studies, it is also applicable to the analysis of territorial conflicts, where state and non-state actors exploit legal ambiguities and institutional gaps to gradually change the status quo.

To understand whether borderization in Georgia exemplifies gray zone tactics, it is necessary to analyze the specific mechanisms of creating and maintaining uncertainty through territorial practices. This raises the central question: How does the process of borderization along the lines of division in Georgia contribute to the institutionalization of legal and spatial uncertainty, and to what extent can it be interpreted as a form of gray zone tactics? The central argument advanced here is that borderization in Georgia represents a deliberate institutionalization of uncertainty. This is achieved through the establishment of visible structures of control that simultaneously reinforce ambiguity over territorial status and applicable legal regimes. In doing so, borderization exhibits core characteristics of gray zone strategies, consolidating *de facto* control while avoiding the political and legal costs associated with overt annexation or renewed large-scale hostilities.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative case study of the process of borderization in Georgia. The choice of the Georgian case is due to the fact that borderization in Georgia represents the most documented and long-lasting example of such practices in the post-Soviet space, which provides a sufficient empirical basis for analysis.

The empirical basis of the study combines a variety of sources to ensure a multifaceted understanding of the borderization process. The analysis draws

on official documents, including bilateral agreements from 2008–2009, Georgian legislation, and statements by officials, which allow us to trace the legal arguments of the parties regarding the borderization process. Reports from international organizations, especially the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe (CoE), play an important role in documenting the development of the process from the perspective of external observers. Materials from human rights organizations document instances of borderization in specific incidents, such as detentions of citizens, access restrictions, and territorial changes. Analytical reports from Georgian research centers offer expert assessments of the processes taking place. Open mapping serves as visual documentation of borderization incidents and their geographical distribution.

A special place in the study is given to longitudinal participant and field observation, based on regular trips to areas adjacent to the lines of separation from 2009 to 2024. This approach made it possible to track the evolution of the borderization process in real time, record changes in control practices, and capture the specifics of the process on the ground. Direct observation of individual sections of administrative dividing lines from the Georgian-controlled side was supplemented by informal conversations with local residents and constant monitoring of developments through local networks and media from both sides of the dividing line.

The study uses the concept of the gray zone as an analytical framework for examining borderization in Georgia. The analysis is structured around two key mechanisms of gray zoning, namely legal ambivalence and spatio-temporal transformation, as well as their informational articulation. Empirical data on borderization are evaluated against these mechanisms to determine the extent to which the Georgian case corresponds to the theoretical characteristics of gray zone tactics. This conceptualization allows us to analyze borderization as a specific gray zone tactic that creates a state of uncertainty around dividing lines.

The Concept of Gray Zones: Disciplinary Approaches and Critical Issues

Contemporary international politics is increasingly marked by the erosion of traditional categories. Situations where de facto and de jure control over territories do not coincide are not new, but have acquired new significance in the post-Cold War context. These inconsistencies give rise to zones of uncertainty where traditional norms of international law are applied in a limited or

selective manner. New forms of governance are emerging that operate outside the framework of international law but still provide effective control over people and resources. State and non-state actors use various forms of pressure and influence, creating sustained tension below the threshold that would justify a full-scale military response. Interdisciplinary analysis confirms these observations, revealing how different fields have conceptualized gray zone dynamics. The concept of the “gray zone” emerged as an attempt to conceptualize such intermediate, “blurred” conditions, phenomena that exist between clearly defined categories: war and peace, legal and illegal, sovereign and occupied. The parallel development of the concept in different disciplines can be explained by the specific practical tasks of each field. Military strategists needed to conceptualize an operational environment that did not fit into traditional categories. Geopoliticians observed territories where formal sovereignty did not coincide with actual control. Legal scholars documented how states exploit the spaces between different legal regimes. Political scientists described political systems in transitional conditions. Each discipline grasped different aspects of a single phenomenon – deliberately produced and maintained uncertainty as a tool for achieving strategic goals.

Military strategic studies elaborate on this logic, interpreting ambiguity as a deliberate tactical tool. The US Special Operations Command has defined the gray zone as the space “between peace and war.”¹ Mazarr systematized this approach, showing that the intensity of actions is deliberately calibrated to transform the status quo without giving the enemy a legal basis for a large-scale response.² As Wirtz has shown, gray zones “attack the victim’s strategy” by shifting the “burden of escalation” to the defending side.³ The International Security Advisory Board’s (ISAB) institutional approach emphasized political purposefulness, according to which gray zones are not chaotic actions, but organized “political confrontation aimed at achieving political goals.”⁴

The geopolitical perspective revealed the spatial dimension of the phenomenon. Vereshchuk and Umland argued that the post-Soviet space between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/European Union (EU) and

¹ United States Special Operations Command, “White Paper: The Gray Zone” (September 9, 2015), 2, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>.

² Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015).

³ James J. Wirtz, “Life in the ‘Gray Zone,’” *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 2 (2017): 106–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2017.1310702>.

⁴ International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict” (U.S. Department of State, January 3, 2017), 1–2, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/isab/266650.htm>.

the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)/Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) functions as systemic gray zones, where the correlation between international presence and territorial integrity creates stable configurations of uncertainty.⁵ However, geopolitical analysis has exposed the problem of spatial consistency. As Knudsen and Frederiksen note, a “matryoshka” effect arises, when some authors refer to the entire post-Soviet space as a gray zone, others to individual countries such as Moldova, and still others to specific conflict regions like Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶

The persistence of uncertainty as a constitutive feature of gray zones can be traced in legal and institutional dimensions. Lattimer and Sands have shown how contemporary conflicts “blur the boundaries between international human rights law and international humanitarian law,” creating legal loopholes that states exploit to avoid accountability.⁷ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Resolution 2240 (2018) noted the practical need for legal conceptualization of gray zones for the activities of humanitarian organizations in “territories of states under de facto control.”⁸

A systematic analysis of disciplinary perspectives reveals three recurring elements: threshold effects, ambivalence of attribution, and controlled escalation. These constitute the minimal core of the concept of gray zones. At the same time, disciplinary fragmentation gives rise to a number of conceptual challenges.

The problem of conceptual vagueness. The concept of the “gray zone” claims to explain the intermediate conditions between war and peace. However, Matisek notes that for many analysts, the concept of the gray zone represents a “tautological expression” of already existing terms.⁹

The most problematic issue is the conceptual confusion between gray zones and hybrid warfare. In theory, the difference is clear: a “gray zone” is

⁵ Iryna Vereshchuk and Andreas Umland, “How to Make Eastern Europe’s Gray Zone Less Gray?” *Harvard International Review*, August 23, 2019, <https://hir.harvard.edu/how-to-make-eastern-europes-gray-zone-less-gray>.

⁶ Ida Harboe Knudsen and Martin Demant Frederiksen, eds., *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities* (London: Anthem Press, 2015); Vereshchuk and Umland, “How to Make Eastern Europe’s Gray Zone Less Gray?”

⁷ Mark Lattimer and Philippe Sands, eds., *The Grey Zone: Civilian Protection Between Human Rights and the Laws of War* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2018), 3.

⁸ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “Resolution 2240 (2018): Unlimited Access to Member States, Including ‘Gray Zone,’ by Council of Europe and United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Bodies,” adopted October 10, 2018, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=25168&lang=en>.

⁹ Jahara W. Matisek, “Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 3 (2017): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.3.1602>.

conceptualized as a regime of interstate competition below the threshold of war,¹⁰ while “hybrid warfare” is conceptualized as a synchronized combination of regular and irregular methods of warfare within a single operational-strategic design.¹¹

However, institutional practice blurs these theoretical boundaries. The lexicon of the US intelligence community distinguishes between a “gray zone” and “hybrid/irregular warfare,” warning that vague definitions undermine the quality of analysis. The very fact that such a glossary exists demonstrates the extent of conceptual uncertainty.¹² In contrast, the House of Commons Defence Committee report uses “gray zone” and “hybrid” interchangeably, noting the absence of a universally accepted definition.¹³

Both concepts are criticized for their blurred boundaries and terminological “creep.” Stoker, Whiteside, and Kofman point to the transformation of analytical tools into “trash cans” for any non-traditional actions.¹⁴ The criticism is fueled by the thesis of “historical banality,” as camouflage, subversion, and the combination of tools have long been characteristic of war; the novelty lies in speed, digital environments, and threshold management.¹⁵ Fridman adds that the terms are politicized and serve as ideological markers rather than analytical categories.¹⁶

The result is a situation where some phenomena (e.g., Russian actions in Crimea in 2014) are simultaneously classified as “hybrid warfare” and “gray zone tactics” without a clear explanation of the differences. The connection between different interpretations of gray zones remains conditional, creating a universal metaphor for any uncertainty, which deprives the concept of analytical precision.

The confusion between analytical and practical application exacerbates the problem. In academic discourse, gray zones are used as a category of analysis,

¹⁰ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

¹¹ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

¹² Office of the Director of National Intelligence – National Intelligence Council, “Updated IC Gray Zone Lexicon: Key Terms and Definitions” (July 2024), 2, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-Updated-IC-Gray-Zone-Lexicon-July2024.pdf>.

¹³ House of Commons Defence Committee, “Defence in the Grey Zone” (2025), 12, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmdfence/405/report.html>.

¹⁴ Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, “Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War – Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (2020), article 4, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss1/4>; Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts>.

¹⁵ James K. Wither, “Making Sense of Hybrid Warfare,” *Connections* 15, no. 2 (2016): 73–87, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11610/Connections.15.2.06>.

¹⁶ Ofer Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization* (2018; online ed., Oxford Academic, 21 Feb. 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190877378.001.0001>.

but in political discourse, the same term is used as an assessment tool with normative undertones.

The development of Echevarria's views illustrates the critical reflection of the concept. In his early works, he viewed gray zones as "classical coercive strategies" below the thresholds of NATO's Article 5, which provided a clear institutional link.¹⁷ In *Weaponizing Risk* (2025), he criticizes excessive enthusiasm for the concept, arguing that "NATO's deterrence measures were calibrated more for hybrid/gray zone attacks of the 2014 type than for large-scale operations of the 2022 type,"¹⁸ showing that the concept can distract from preparedness for conventional threats.

The problem of geopolitical instrumentalization. Various actors use the concept of gray zones not as a neutral analytical tool, but as a means of geopolitical positioning. Western think tanks are incorporating the concept into the logic of defending their own interests. The Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team characterizes gray zones as actions that "threaten the interests of the United States and its allies."¹⁹ The RAND Corporation has analyzed in detail China's "gray zone tactics" against American allies in the Indo-Pacific region, identifying about 80 different coercive tactics.²⁰ Wilson, vice president of the Atlantic Council, argued that "Russia seeks to keep these neighbors at best in a permanent gray zone and at worst under its domination."²¹

Russian analysts, on the other hand, criticize the concept as a Western analytical and political tool, noting that "the gray zone has become a kind of geopolitical marker that is applied to opponents of the unipolar system of Pax Americana."²² They further claim the term is used to justify "creating unpre-

¹⁷ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Weaponizing Risk: Recalibrating Western Deterrence* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2025).

¹⁹ Strategic Multilayer Assessment, "Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities: A Multi-Agency Deep Dive Assessment, The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone" (ViTTa Report, Winter 2016), 2.

²⁰ Bonny Lin et al., *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China's Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA594-1>.

²¹ Damon Wilson, "It Is the Absence of Security for Georgia and Ukraine That Has Tempted Russia to Occupy and Annex Their Territory," July 18, 2018, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/deimon-vilsoni-usaftrkhoaebis-ararseboba-saqartvelo.aspx>.

²² "[50 ottentkov serogo'] Seraia zona: teoreticheskaia kontseptsia i strategicheskii instrument Zapada: Zachem Rossiia evropeiskaia 'seraia zona' s SShA vmesto chetkoi 'cherno-beloi' granitsy na zapade materika?" *News2.ru*, July 23, 2022, <https://www.news2.ru/story/648912>.

dictability in planned steps” as part of strategies to contain Russia and China.²³ Russian strategic documents prefer to use their own terminology like “information space” and “new generation warfare” avoiding Western conceptual frameworks.²⁴

Such mutual instrumentalization calls into question the analytical applicability of the concept. In practical military-political analysis, Western experts use it to describe the actions of geopolitical opponents, who, in turn, criticize this approach and develop alternative conceptual frameworks.

The problem of operationalization and scalability. In addition to politicization, the concept faces methodological limitations in its practical application. Even with a narrow definition of gray zones as modes of coercion below the threshold of war, the problem of choosing the level of analysis arises. Individual episodes like an incident on the line of demarcation, the installation of a barrier, a targeted cyberattack may appear to be gray zone actions. However, it is unclear how many such episodes are necessary to speak of a systematic campaign rather than isolated random actions.²⁵

Geographical specificity creates additional constraints. Approaches developed to analyze Chinese actions in the South China Sea (use of maritime police, gradual change of the status quo) do not work well when analyzing borderization in Georgia (legal ambiguity, spatial control), and vice versa.²⁶ Attempts to create a universal definition lead to excessive abstraction. A more productive approach is to adapt analytical tools to the specific context.

The problem of temporal nature of gray zones: a transitional state or a stable regime? The conceptual uncertainty of gray zones is also evident in the question of their temporal nature. Do they represent a transitional state between peace and war, or do they function as an independent, stable regime of interaction?

Milevski argues that the gray zone has “insignificant strategic and analytical value” but “high social utility.”²⁷ The concept can be a “strategic trap” for defend-

²³ Aleksandr Bartosh, “Seraia zona – pole bitvy XXI veka,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, October 27, 2022, https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2022-10-27/1_1212_web.html.

²⁴ Dominika Dziwisz, “Rethinking Future Conflicts: The Cyber Grey Zone from the Russian Perspective,” *Politeja* 5, no. 92 (2024): 294, <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.21.2024.92.13>.

²⁵ Lyle J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2942>.

²⁶ Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

²⁷ Lukas Milevski, “When Does Gray Zone Confrontation End? A Conceptual Analysis,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 112 (1st Quarter 2024): 8, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/joint-force-quarterly/vol112/iss1/2>.

ers who are forced to “play by the rules” set by the initiator of the gray zone campaign, without having any criteria for victory within this logic.

This criticism can be reinterpreted by recognizing that gray zones operate according to a different strategic logic. Mazarr describes the gray zone as a deliberately constructed regime of coercion below the thresholds of *jus ad bellum*, where the initiator achieves cumulative changes to the status quo in small steps, constantly managing escalation thresholds and relying on plausible deniability.²⁸ In this interpretation, “success” is measured not by decisive victory, but by long-term change in the actual situation on the ground while minimizing political and legal costs. Maintaining “gray” rather than removing it becomes a rational strategic goal.

The thresholds between the gray zone and war are unstable over time. A campaign classified as a gray zone in one period may later either stabilize at a low level of intensity or escalate into open war. Ukraine demonstrates a model of transformation, where a situation classified as a gray zone in 2014 escalated into open warfare by 2022. Georgia, on the other hand, illustrates the stability of the gray zone regime for more than 17 years after the 2008 war. The US intelligence community lexicon predicts that gray zone campaigns will remain the dominant dynamic of international competition until at least 2030.²⁹

Thus, gray zones can function as a transitional phase and as a long-term regime. Analytical approaches should distinguish between cases where a gray zone represents a temporary stage of conflict and cases where it becomes a self-sufficient form of strategic interaction. The classification of actions as gray zone depends on the circumstances, the actor, and the context.³⁰

The Analytical Value of the Gray Zone Concept

Critical analysis has revealed serious methodological problems with the concept of gray zones. A logical question arises: why use a problematic analytical tool? This question becomes particularly acute in the context of contemporary debates about the relationship between gray zones and related concepts such as political warfare, coercive diplomacy, and hybrid warfare. The analytical value

²⁸ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

²⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence – National Intelligence Council, “Conflict in the Gray Zone: A Prevailing Geopolitical Dynamic Through 2030” (July 2024), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-Conflict-In-The-Gray-Zone-July2024.pdf>.

³⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence – National Intelligence Council, “Updated IC Gray Zone Lexicon” (July 2024).

of the concept of gray zones can be justified through a critical comparison with these alternatives.

The first area of alternatives focuses on non-military instruments of strategy. Political warfare, actively developed in the context of long-term competition between great powers, encompasses the use of all means except war to achieve strategic goals. Kennan defined it as the systematic use of propaganda, economic pressure, and subversive actions to weaken the enemy.³¹ Brands, on the other hand, emphasized long-term competition through the accumulation of advantages.³² At first glance, this is close to gray zones – both approaches describe actions “below the threshold of war.” However, the difference is that political warfare does not emphasize threshold logic or the conscious calibration of intensity to avoid legitimizing a military response. It describes an arsenal of non-military means, but does not explain the strategy of dosing their application to keep actions within the threshold space. Actions can be of any intensity as long as they are not formally war, whereas the specificity of the gray zone lies in deliberate threshold management that allows for highly intense actions while remaining below the level that would justify a military response.

Coercive diplomacy analyzes the threat of force as a means of extorting concessions from the enemy. Schelling’s logic of the “burden of escalation” is close to that of the gray zone, whereby the initiator structures the situation so that the responsibility for escalation is shifted to the enemy.³³ However, there is a fundamental difference in strategic goals here. Coercive diplomacy is focused on resolution through the opponent’s compliance. Pressure is exerted to achieve a specific result and subsequent reduction of tension. The gray zone, on the contrary, may seek to maintain a state of uncertainty as an end in itself. Gray zone strategies often have no clear end point since ambiguity becomes not a tactical means to achieve compliance, but a strategic state that is inherently beneficial.³⁴ Coercive diplomacy is a tool for achieving a goal, while the gray zone can be the goal itself.

The next approach involves a combination of methods, which brings us to the most controversial concept. As noted above, the conceptual confusion

³¹ George F. Kennan, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” Policy Planning Memorandum, May 4, 1948, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116191>.

³² Hal Brands, “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2018): 31–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1556559>.

³³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Robert J. Art and Patrick M. Cronin, eds., *The United States and Coercive Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003).

³⁴ Wirtz, “Life in the ‘Gray Zone,’” 109.

between gray zones and hybrid warfare remains problematic both in institutional practice and in analytical discourse. The concept of hybrid warfare suffers from its own vagueness, but the key difference from gray zones is its focus on synchronizing methods rather than staying below the threshold.³⁵ The difference can be illustrated by the following questions: hybrid warfare answers “how” (combination of means), whereas gray zone answers “where” (threshold space) and “why” (managing escalation to avoid war while achieving change).³⁶ Moreover, hybrid warfare, being “war” in the Clausewitzian sense, can escalate into open conflict since the synchronization of means does not imply any restrictions on intensity. The gray zone, by contrast, operates on threshold management logic that aims to avoid escalation to war. When such escalation occurs (as in Ukraine 2014–2022), it marks the end of the gray zone.

It is precisely in this consistent inability of alternative concepts to tie together disparate elements that the unique analytical value of gray zones lies. The concept of gray zones ensures their systemic integration through the prism of threshold management, where the intensity of actions is deliberately calibrated, responsibility is blurred through legal and organizational mechanisms, and gradualism allows changes to accumulate without provoking a decisive response. The concept integrates the logic of coercion from coercive diplomacy, non-military instruments from political warfare, and a combination of means from hybrid warfare through the overarching logic of threshold management. A gray zone is not simply the sum of these elements, but a specific mode of their coordination in conditions of deliberate avoidance of both open war and formal peace.

The practical applicability of the concept is confirmed by its use in operational research. Morris et al. systematized eight key characteristics of gray zones and proposed an operational typology of intensity levels, ranging from “persistent” low-intensity routine actions through “moderate” to “aggressive” quasi-military actions.³⁷ The authors explicitly classify Russia’s actions in Georgia as an example of gray zone operations, noting the evolution “from a temporary, military-controlled space after the 2008 war” to a “long-term strategy of manipulating and redefining lines of control.”³⁸ Their operational typology provides an

³⁵ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

³⁶ Milevski, “When Does Gray Zone Confrontation End?” 10.

³⁷ Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 8–11, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2942>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

analytical framework for the comparative analysis of gray zone campaigns at the macro level of strategic competition. The present study develops this approach by focusing on the specific mechanisms of producing and sustaining gray zone dynamics through spatial practices of borderization.

Operationalization of the Concept of Gray Zone

An analysis of existing approaches has revealed the need to formulate a working definition that avoids conceptual vagueness and geopolitical bias. Based on a synthesis of military-strategic, institutional, and operational approaches, the following working definition can be derived: *gray zones are operationalized as stable regimes of coercion, deliberately kept below the threshold of armed conflict, characterized by difficult attribution of the source of actions and controlled escalation.*³⁹ Three elements constitute the minimal core of the concept:

Threshold calibration refers to actions that are deliberately kept below the level that would legitimize the use of force under international law. The intensity of the impact remains sufficient to exert pressure and transform the situation, but insufficient to provide the adversary with a legal and political basis for a large-scale military response.⁴⁰

Ambiguity of attribution means that the source of the actions is obscured through legal mechanisms such as the use of de facto structures, organizational obscurity in chains of command, or the deployment of proxy actors. The blurring of responsibility complicates the formulation of an adequate response and creates space for plausible deniability.⁴¹

Controlled escalation implies conscious control of intensity to avoid crossing critical thresholds. The initiator retains the ability to both intensify and de-escalate pressure depending on the opponent's reaction, using the threat of escalation as a tool of coercion while effectively avoiding a transition to open conflict.⁴²

This definition is compatible with the operational typology of Morris et al., who distinguish between levels of intensity of gray zone actions, from constant low-intensity to aggressive quasi-military.⁴³ While their approach includes

³⁹ Synthesis based on Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*; International Security Advisory Board, "Report on Gray Zone Conflict"; Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*.

⁴⁰ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 5–7.

⁴¹ International Security Advisory Board, "Report on Gray Zone Conflict," 3–4; Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage*, 9.

⁴² Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 137, Table 5.1.

a broad catalog of tools applicable to various spheres from cyber operations, information campaigns to economic coercion, this study focuses specifically on how the minimal core operates through the territorial dimension. Their systematization confirms that the identified elements constitute a stable core of the concept in various contexts of application. As applied to territorial conflicts, the minimal core materializes through two main mechanisms.

The mechanism of legal ambivalence creates situations where formally legal actions lead to a de facto change in the territorial status quo. Selective interpretation of international law justifies unilateral actions.⁴⁴ The exploitation of procedural mechanisms, such as the use of negotiation formats, monitoring missions, and access regimes, blocks effective countermeasures.⁴⁵ The creation of alternative legal regimes through the establishment of de facto jurisdictions without international recognition and the delegation of powers to proxy structures complements this mechanism. Challenging actions is difficult because they formally comply with a certain interpretation of the norms, despite their destructive nature for the existing order.

Spatial-temporal transformation mechanism includes three interrelated dimensions:

Spatial uncertainty creates ambiguity regarding jurisdiction and lines of control. The blurring of administrative boundaries is achieved through the absence of agreed reference maps, the creation of buffer zones with undefined status, and the gradual change of actual lines of control.⁴⁶ Space is produced as ambivalent, since physical structures of control exist, but there is no international recognition of their legitimacy. This uncertainty is a deliberate strategy that allows the dominant actor to maximize freedom of action while minimizing opportunities for effective counteraction.

Strategic gradualism is expressed in a phased deployment, where each individual step is scaled as insufficient to legitimize a military response, reflecting threshold management.⁴⁷ Normalizing each stage of change before moving on to the next allows the boundaries of what is acceptable to be gradually shifted without triggering effective countermeasures. The effect is such that the combination

⁴⁴ Lattimer and Sands, eds., *The Grey Zone*.

⁴⁵ Viktor Startsun and Il'ia Balkanov, "The Definition of 'the Gray Zone' and the Problems of Its Incorporation into Legal Support of International Security," *Military Aspects of International Law* 3 (2016): 80.

⁴⁶ Knudsen and Frederiksen, eds., *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe*; Vereshchuk and Umland, "How to Make Eastern Europe's Gray Zone Less Gray?"

⁴⁷ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 33.

of small steps radically transforms the territorial configuration without provoking the response that each individual action could have caused.⁴⁸ Preserving the possibility of de-escalation through a wave-like mode of action embodies the principle of controlled escalation.

Sustained intensity characterizes the manner in which spatial-temporal transformation is carried out. In territorial conflicts, intensity is inseparable from the duration of the process and is expressed through a combination of spatial practices such as erection of barriers, detentions, and restrictions on mobility, operating in a cyclical temporal regime without clear completion. Constant pressure keeps the enemy on alert, creating lasting tension that is psychologically, politically, and economically exhausting.⁴⁹ This pattern, consisting of a sequence of incident, protest, condemnation, lull, and repetition, sustains tension without crossing critical thresholds.

It is conceptually important to understand that intensity is not a separate measure, independent of gradualism. Gradualism without intensity is simply slowness, while intensity without gradualism is escalation toward war. Only their combination creates a specific gray zone quality, when sufficient pressure to transform the status quo is maintained below critical thresholds that would legitimize a military response.

Information exposure articulates and reinforces legal ambivalence and spatial-temporal transformation through terminological polyphony, informational ambiguity, and cycles of media events.⁵⁰ The creation of multiple interpretations makes it difficult to independently verify facts and form an international consensus on the nature of what is happening. Restricted access to disputed territories, the use of closed zones, and non-transparent decision-making maintain a state of conceptual ambiguity.⁵¹ The logic of information influence is to maintain a multiplicity of interpretations that hinders the formation of a consolidated position and creates constant uncertainty about the nature of actions.

This framework provides a conceptual basis for rigorous empirical analysis of cases where institutionalized uncertainty becomes an instrument of territorial control through spatial practices.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

⁴⁹ John Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russia’s ‘New Generation Warfare’ and Implications for the U.S. Army” (Modern War Institute at West Point, October 18, 2016), 14.

⁵⁰ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 3; International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict,” 2.

⁵¹ International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict,” 2.

The next step requires turning to the concept of borderization, through which these mechanisms materialize in specific spatial practices in the post-Soviet space.

Borderization as an Instrument of the Gray Zone Regime

The structural connection between gray zones and border spaces. Gray zones do not arise arbitrarily in political or geographical space. They predominantly materialize in border zones, or territories where jurisdictions intersect or are contested, where sovereignty is blurred and legal regimes are ambiguous. Border areas have structural characteristics that make them particularly susceptible to gray zone logic as they are often outside the direct control of central authorities, regulated by multiple and sometimes contradictory legal regimes, and inhabited by communities whose allegiance may be contested or exploited.

The connection between gray zones and border spaces has been explicitly conceptualized in recent works on border and migration studies. Leutloff-Grandits suggests that the gray zone and liminality function as complementary analytical frameworks for understanding border processes.⁵² The gray zone describes the level of instrumental coercion by the state at the border, including actions below the threshold of open conflict, lawfare, and semi-privatized practices involving the coast guard, contractors, and parastatal formations. The state's gray zone tactics at the border produce lived uncertainty (liminality) as their socio-temporal trace. Border practices become the core of the gray zone strategy, materializing through infrastructure such as fences, waiting areas, distribution centers and producing liminal states characterized by uncertain time, "temporary traps," and ambiguous legal status.⁵³ Cold-Ravnkilde, using the example of the externalization of EU migration control in Mali, documents how borderwork takes place "in the gray zone" between law and practice. State agents and bureaucrats act through bargaining, delays, foot-dragging, and strategic cooperation while covertly editing the rules "on the ground," without crossing the threshold of open conflict or breaking agreements. Diverse border practices, such as readmissions, biometrics, and administrative procedures, change access and

⁵² Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, "The Grey Zone and Liminality as Complementary Conceptual Approaches for Border and Migration Studies," *Current Issues in Migration Research* 2, no. 1 (2025): 32, <https://doi.org/10.24834/cimr.2025.1.1919>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

mobility regimes without formally violating legal norms.⁵⁴ These works translate the abstract concept of the gray zone into a concrete analytical toolkit for border studies by operationalizing it through material border practices and their socio-temporal effects.⁵⁵

The specificity of the term in the Georgian context. The application of the term “borderization” to Georgia contains a conceptual contradiction. In classical border studies, borderization describes the strengthening of legally recognized international borders. In the Georgian case, the process is aimed at creating the appearance of a state border where it does not legally exist. The administrative boundary lines with Abkhazia and the former SOAD are not internationally recognized borders, but represent lines of effective control following the conflicts of the 1990s and 2008. However, physical infrastructure and bureaucratic practices create a material and symbolic reality of a border or something that looks, functions, and is experienced as a border without legally being one.

Despite ongoing conceptual debates, “borderization” has become established in professional and media discourse. The term has taken root because it accurately describes what is visible like fences, posts, signs, and implicitly refers to the process – the attempt to turn an administrative line into a state border. Bachelet finds the term functional precisely because of its material, unilateral, and symbolic characteristics.⁵⁶ In this work, the term borderization is used with an understanding of this duality. It refers to an attempt to present an administrative line of control as a state border through material and symbolic practices, without any basis in international law.

Existing studies of borderization in Georgia. Borderization in Georgia has been studied in several disciplinary traditions. Boyle was one of the first to analyze the process through the concept of “fortified borders” and the discursive construction of the “little Berlin wall.”⁵⁷ He also noted the “theatrical nature of the fence,”⁵⁸ an observation developed by Toal and Merabishvili,

⁵⁴ Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, “Borderwork in the Grey Zone: Everyday Resistance within European Border Control Initiatives in Mali,” *Geopolitics* 27, no. 5 (2022): 1450–1469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1919627>.

⁵⁵ Leutloff-Grandits, “The Grey Zone and Liminality.”

⁵⁶ Ariane Bachelet, “Borderisation of South Ossetia: The Perspective of the Border Population,” in *Post-Soviet Borders: A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands*, ed. Sabine von Löwis and Beate Eschment (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2023), 153–169, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003169376>.

⁵⁷ Edward Boyle, “A ‘Little Berlin Wall’ for All,” *Europa Regional* 24 (2016): 80–92.

⁵⁸ Edward Boyle, “Borderization in Georgia: Sovereignty Materialized,” *Eurasia Border Review* 7 (2016): 14, <https://doi.org/10.14943/ebr.7.1.1>.

who show how each placement of a new sign or barrier becomes a geopolitical performance.⁵⁹

The social and existential consequences of these material changes are documented in works focusing on the lived experiences of border communities. Bachelet explores borderization as an everyday and emotional geography, analyzing how physical barriers transform mobility practices and sever social ties.⁶⁰ Gotfredsen, based on an ethnographic analysis of 14 villages, shows how borderization produces “sensitive spaces” – zones of overlapping sovereignties where rules are applied unpredictably.⁶¹ The process disrupts everyday mobility and erodes kinship ties, turning residents into “human shields” between competing sovereignties.⁶²

At the same time, policy research and human rights reports document human rights violations and propose measures to mitigate the consequences of borderization.⁶³ Additional tools include the EastWatch mapping platform and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) map, which visualize the spatial expansion of the process.⁶⁴

These works create a rich empirical and analytical base, documenting in detail what is happening on the administrative lines and how it is being experienced. At the same time, the question of the strategic logic of the process remains insufficiently clarified, particularly regarding how borderization fits into broader patterns of territorial control and geopolitical pressure.

Borderization in Georgia: An Empirical Analysis

The analysis focuses on episodes that most clearly illustrate the functioning of each category of gray zone regime mechanisms. For this reason, the main focus is

⁵⁹ Gerard Toal and Gela Merabishvili, “Borderization Theater: Geopolitical Entrepreneurship on the South Ossetia Boundary Line, 2008–2018,” *Caucasus Survey* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2019.1565192>.

⁶⁰ Bachelet, “Borderisation of South Ossetia.”

⁶¹ Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen, “‘We Are Like Human Shields’: Dilemmas of Mobility, Kinship and Place in Georgian Borderland Villages,” *Caucasus Survey* (2024): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.30965/23761202-bja10040>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kornely Kakachia, Salome Minesashvili, Levan Kakhishvili, and Lasha Tchantouridze, *Mitigating Russia’s Borderization of Georgia* (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, 2017); Joseph Larsen, *Deterring Russia’s Borderization of Georgia*, GIP Commentary, no. 18 (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, 2017); *Zone of Barbed Wires* (Tbilisi: Human Rights Center, 2019).

⁶⁴ Jelger Groeneveld, “Checkpoint Regime South Ossetia,” *EastWatch*, 2020, <https://eastwatch.eu/checkpoint-regime-south-ossetia>; Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), “Incidents of Borderization,” interactive map, <https://gfsis.org/maps/borderization>.

on the territory of the former SOAD, where borderization was more intense than in Abkhazia, where most of the dividing line runs along the Inguri River.⁶⁵

Legal ambivalence operates through the creation of multiple jurisdictions and the selective use of international legal categories. The process of legal justification undertaken by Russia and the de facto authorities is a striking example of legal and political duplicity. Actions are presented as legal, but their real consequences are deliberately obscured and established international norms are circumvented.

Before the 2008 war, the mass issuance of Russian passports to the population in the conflict zones became one of the tools used by Russia to create a pretext for the allegedly necessary “protection” of Russian citizens. The sequence of legal acts in 2008–2009 shows the systematic preparation of a legal framework for borderization. After the end of active hostilities, Russia took additional steps to create a “legal” justification for its continued presence in the conflict zones on Georgian territory.⁶⁶ On September 17, 2008, Russia and the so-called Republic of South Ossetia signed a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. In response, on October 23, 2008, Georgia adopted the Law on Occupied Territories.⁶⁷ A month later, representatives of the de facto authorities spoke of the need to “carry out delimitation” unilaterally, in accordance with the administrative boundaries of the former SOAD.⁶⁸

On January 26, 2009, the Georgian Ministry of Defense signed a Memorandum with the EUMM on limiting the deployment of weapons near the former SOAD and Abkhazia. In February of the same year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated Russia’s “commitment” to ensuring the security of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including through military bases. At the same time, it was emphasized that, in addition to security and border control issues, “these people can independently resolve all practical issues related to socio-economic development and the establishment of peaceful life.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ “Interior Ministry Briefs Diplomats on ‘Borderisation,’” *Civil Georgia*, Tbilisi, June 4, 2013.

⁶⁶ Novitskii, “Peacekeepers will operate on the border between Abkhazia and Georgia in the previous regime,” *Kavkazskii Uzel*, June 30, 2008, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/138562>.

⁶⁷ “The Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories,” International Labour Organization – NATLEX, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/SERIAL/81268/88220/F1630879580/GEO81268.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Boris Attoev, “Our border will be guarded by the border troops of the KGB RiUO,” *Committee Information Service*, October 21, 2008, <http://cominf.org/node/1166478531>; Iurii Dzitsoity, “South Ossetia needs to establish a border and conduct itself as an independent state vis-à-vis Georgia,” *Committee Information Service*, October 8, 2008, <http://cominf.org/node/1166478457>.

⁶⁹ “Interview with Russian Foreign Minister S. V. Lavrov, RIA Novosti, Russia Today television channel, and Voice of Russia radio station,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 25,

During the same period, accusations were made against the Georgian side, claiming that “Georgian special services have become more frequent in staging provocations against South Ossetia.”⁷⁰ Although the exact starting point of the borderization process remains controversial, it can be said with certainty that sporadic actions began in early 2009.⁷¹ This stage was characterized by the short-term nature of the actions when barriers were erected, but then removed after only a few days. Perhaps the purpose of these one-off provocations and accompanying “official statements” was to prepare the ground for the “official announcement” of the Agreements on Joint Measures to Protect the State Border of the Republic of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on April 30, 2009. The decision was probably made long before that. This is evidenced by the immediate deployment of the first units of the Russian Border Guard Service on the same day the agreements were signed. According to these documents, the de facto Republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia delegated to Russia the authority to protect their so-called state borders.⁷² The essence of the agreements is to strengthen the relevant structures, including their professional capacity, and to confirm that Russia will provide protection for the de facto “border.”

As Lavrov promised, the Russian Federation’s first steps in the territory of the former SOAD and Abkhazia were aimed at strengthening its military presence and creating border infrastructure. The “border guard contingent” consisted of border guards from Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB).⁷³ According to Russian media reports, the construction of border infrastructure facilities was described as part of the FSB’s activities “within the framework of international agreements.”⁷⁴ These units were involved in installing information signs, negotiating the allocation of land for “border posts,” and deploying surveillance systems.⁷⁵

2010, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/261460.

⁷⁰ “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation,” *Committee Information Service*, March 26, 2009, <http://cominf.org/node/1166479563>.

⁷¹ Goga Aptsiauri, “Russian Troops Try To Shift South Ossetia Border Markers,” *Radio Tavisupleba* (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty), August 3, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_Troops_Try_To_Shift_South_Ossetia_Border_Markers/1791641.html.

⁷² “Russian Border Guards Begin Guarding South Ossetia’s State Borders,” *Committee Information Service*, May 1, 2009, <http://cominf.org/node/1166479791>.

⁷³ Tornike Turmanidze, “The Occupation Line – Russia’s Foreign Policy Instrument Against Georgia” (August 5, 2017) GFSIS Expert Opinion no. 89, 5, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4709972.

⁷⁴ “Russian border guards celebrate their professional holiday,” *United Russia*, May 28, 2012, <https://er.ru/news/84633>.

⁷⁵ “For six years, border guards have controlled the border of South Ossetia,” *Sputnik Ossetia*, April 30, 2015 (updated June 3, 2015), https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/South_Ossetia/20150430/50728.html.

This sequence of legal acts creates a situation of multiple jurisdictions, which is a key characteristic of the gray zone regime. For international law, there is an occupied territory of Georgia; for Russia, there is an allied state with a legitimate border. This legal duality allows Russia to act “within the framework of international agreements” (as emphasized by the Russian media), avoiding an unambiguous classification of its actions as aggression. The source of the actions is blurred, as formally, decisions are made by the de facto authorities, but in reality, the process is controlled by Russia, and legally, everything is formalized through a “delegation of authority.”

Manipulation of the category of “delimitation” also illustrates the mechanism of producing legal uncertainty. According to international standards, delimitation is a legal process in which two sovereign states establish and describe in writing the location of their common border, usually as a result of negotiations and mutual agreement. Accordingly, such a process requires at least the intention and participation of two or more countries.⁷⁶ Despite this, the de facto authorities, knowing about the principles of international practice, stated that they had unilaterally decided to apply this method to install information signs and other types of barrier infrastructure.

It should be noted that there are several interpretations of this phenomenon. In 2010, after another round of meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), the head of the so-called South Ossetian delegation, Chigoev, called this process “work on defining the state border line,” emphasizing that this was “our unilateral format” and clearly stating that “this is not a delimitation or demarcation of the border, since such actions are carried out only in an agreed bilateral format.”⁷⁷ It is also interesting to note that, although the Russian side is actively involved in this unilateral process, it has taken a different position on “unilateral delimitation” in other contexts of the conflict.⁷⁸ For example, when on November 19, 2014, the Ukrainian government approved a decision on the unilateral demarcation of the Russian-Ukrainian border, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation stated that “the demarcation of a state border is a mutual process between

⁷⁶ Mohammed Al Sayel, Peter Lohmann, and Christian Heipke, “International Boundary Making – Three Case Studies,” in *Proceedings of the ISPRS Workshop on High-Resolution Earth Imaging for Geospatial Information* 38, no. 1 (2010).

⁷⁷ “Yuzhnaya Osetiya v tselom udovletvorena itogami vstrechi v Ergneti,” *Committee Information Service*, December, 10, 2010, <https://cominf.org/node/1166485478>.

⁷⁸ Viktor Nekhezin, “Unilateral demarcation: what do experts think?” *BBC Russian Service*, June 17, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2014/06/140617_ukraine_russia_demarcation_borders.

neighboring states, therefore unilateral demarcation cannot be legally binding on the other party.”⁷⁹ This approach reveals selectivity and inconsistency in the application of international legal practice by both the Russian Federation and the de facto authorities, when the established legal basis for delimitation and demarcation is interpreted frivolously, when in one context it is applied unilaterally, and in another, depending on political interests, is completely rejected.

Legal ambivalence persists even in the presence of decisions by international courts. On April 9, 2024, the European Court of Human Rights unanimously concluded that Russia’s actions aimed at effectively establishing new borders since 2009 violated numerous human rights.⁸⁰ However, the Russian side continues to position the borderization as a legitimate action to protect the de facto borders of its allies, and characterizes the decisions of international bodies as “political manipulation” and manifestations of “double standards.”⁸¹

Using an international legal term, but applying it unilaterally in a deliberately unlawful context, the actors create a quasi-legal procedure that embodies the logic of ambivalence of attribution. The source of the actions can formally be attributed to the de facto authorities conducting the “delimitation of their borders,” although in reality the process is being carried out by Russia. Legal gaps and procedural obstruction reinforce this effect. International monitoring mechanisms cannot respond effectively because the actions are formalized as de facto internal procedures of states.

The effectiveness of this process is evident in its gradual normalization in the minds of local residents. During repeated field visits to Nikozi, Ergneti, Ditsi and Mereti (2009–2024), a noticeable linguistic shift was observed: residents increasingly use the term “border” when describing the barrier. This semantic change, although seemingly insignificant, signals a mental acceptance of an imposed spatial order without international legal recognition.

The legal justifications for borderization include all the characteristics of legal ambivalence as a mechanism of gray zone by exploiting its ambiguity.

Spatial-temporal transformation includes three interrelated dimensions: spatial uncertainty, strategic gradualism, and sustained intensity.

⁷⁹ “Ukraine to continue building wall on border with Russia in April,” TASS, March 5, 2015, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1811470>.

⁸⁰ European Court of Human Rights, *Georgia v. Russia (IV)*, Application No. 39611/18. Judgment of April 9, 2024. Strasbourg: ECHR.

⁸¹ “The Policy of Double Standards Is Criminal and Unacceptable: The South Ossetian Foreign Ministry on the Decision of the European Court,” *Committee Information Service*, April 10, 2024, <https://cominf.org/en/node/1166555836>.

Spatial uncertainty is evident in blurred lines of jurisdiction and control. One of the most obvious questions arising in connection with so-called “demarcation” is: what maps are used as a guide when installing barbed wire, metal barriers, and other structures? Logically, if there were clarity regarding the cartographic materials used, it would at least be possible to predict where a new barrier might appear.⁸²

Representatives of the de facto authorities claim that they are acting “in accordance with the 1922 Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of Georgia, which defines the administrative border of the former SOAD, and we are not crossing that line.”⁸³ However, according to other sources, the de facto authorities have decided to use the 1984 base maps to define the territory within the borders of the former SOAD. Utiashvili claims that “there are no maps or any official documents indicating the exact route of the occupation line.”⁸⁴

During the Soviet era, there were no physical markers on the ground, and various editions of geographical maps existed, each with a different configuration of administrative boundaries. Administrative boundaries often coincided with the boundaries of collective farms, which were subject to change. The maps used by Russian border guards for demarcation vary in scale, allowing the occupation forces leeway in interpretation.⁸⁵

Thus, a situation arises in which, firstly, the maps provided differ in scale and interpretation, and secondly, they are not the only copies that can be used for this purpose. New circumstances may constantly arise, accompanied by “numerous appeals” from the de facto authorities or the local population. This level of uncertainty and ambiguity provides the Russian Federation with a flexible tool for exerting constant pressure on Georgia.

Spatial uncertainty is a deliberate strategy that allows the dominant actor to maximize freedom of action while minimizing opportunities for effective counteraction. The absence of agreed reference maps, the creation of zones with uncertain status, and the gradual change of actual lines of control produce a space that is ambivalent, namely, physical structures of control exist, but there is no clarity regarding their legal status and territorial basis. For communities

⁸² Turmanidze, *The Occupation Line*, 7.

⁸³ “V Tskhinvale proshlo zasedanie iugoosetinskoj Komissii po delimitatsii granitsy,” *Committee Information Service*, March 15, 2010, <http://cominf.org/node/1166482670>.

⁸⁴ Shota Utiashvili, “The Creeping Occupation: In Search of a Solution. Georgians Are Gathering the Grapes of Russian Wrath,” *InoSMI*, November 28, 2017, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20171128/240865491.html>.

⁸⁵ Turmanidze, *The Occupation Line*, 8.

living along these shifting lines, strategic ambiguity translates into sustained psychological pressure. In conversations conducted in Nikozi, Ergneti, and Mereti between 2013 and 2019, residents consistently emphasized living in a state of permanent alertness, not knowing when the next barrier might appear, which road might be blocked, or which family member might be detained.

Strategic gradualism operates through the calibration of each step of the borderization process below the level that would legitimize a military response. The duration and fragmentary nature of the process are key factors in this mechanism. If it wished, the Russian Federation could complete the demarcation process much more quickly. An illustrative example is the fact that Russia built a 60-kilometer high-tech security fence along the administrative border between annexed Crimea and mainland Ukraine, equipped with barbed wire and hundreds of sensors, in approximately four years (2014–2018).⁸⁶

In the direction of the former SOAD, the total length of the occupation line exceeds 350 kilometers. According to various estimates for 2018–2021, fragmented fenced areas range from 52 to 60 kilometers.⁸⁷ However, in order to keep this tool active, the process is carried out in waves, without any clear pattern. This tactic allows each episode to be kept below the critical threshold.

Each individual step may seem insignificant and not requiring a decisive response. Normalizing each stage of change before moving on to the next allows the boundaries of what is acceptable to be gradually shifted without triggering effective countermeasures. As a result, the combination of small steps transforms the territorial configuration without provoking the response that each individual action could have caused.

Borderization acts as a kind of irritant that allows for a quick and limited demonstration of control before anyone has time to react. It puts the other side in a position where it must choose between concession and the risk of a larger conflict.⁸⁸ Having such a tool in the arsenal allows the situation to be kept “below the threshold,” at a level sufficient to put pressure on the Georgian state and society, but not so intense as to provoke strong international resistance or

⁸⁶ “Russia Finishes Building Border Fence between Crimea and Ukraine,” *BBC News*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46699807>.

⁸⁷ Il’ia Barabanov, “‘Pust’ oni chut’ otodvinutsia’: Kak zhivut gruzinskie sela, cherez kotorye proshla granitsa Iuzhnoi Osetii,” *BBC Russian Service*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45130357>; Jaba Ananidze, “‘Mtsotsavi Okupatsiis’ Opitsialuri Danakargi da Tvitkmakopili Khelisupeba,” *Batumelebi*, September 13, 2020, <https://batumelebi.netgazeti.ge/news/296447>; Ia Asatiani, “Rogor ‘Ghobavs’ Ruseti Sakartvelos?” *iFact*, <https://ifact.ge/borderizatsia>.

⁸⁸ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 36–37.

reaction.⁸⁹ Preserving the possibility of de-escalation through a wave-like mode of action embodies the principle of controlled escalation. After each incident, the process can be suspended, barriers can be temporarily removed, creating the appearance of readiness for dialogue. However, the process then resumes in another place or at another time, maintaining constant pressure while retaining control over the intensity.

Sustained intensity characterizes the way in which spatial-temporal transformation is achieved by maintaining prolonged pressure without crossing critical thresholds. Each new incident of borderization traditionally caused public outrage and civil protests, followed by official condemnation from the Georgian authorities and a reaction from the international community, only for the process to subside and resume a few days or weeks later. This cyclical pattern fueled internal political tensions, destabilized the situation, and confused society.

However, amid the deepening domestic political instability of recent years, public attention and protest energy have been redirected toward internal political confrontations, reducing the visibility of borderization incidents in public discourse. The domestic political crisis creates conditions for the continuation of gray zone practices amid weakened public control – an effect that may be either an unintended consequence of internal dynamics or the result of the strategic use of domestic political instability.

The sustained intensity is maintained by the ongoing detentions of Georgian citizens along the occupation lines in both Abkhazia and the former SOAD.⁹⁰ The first cases occurred immediately after the August 2008 war, and in subsequent years, cases of illegal detentions became more frequent and continue to this day. Although data from different years and sources vary, it is safe to say that a total of more than 1,500 people have been detained in the Tskhinvali (Tskhinvali) direction. Borderization not only restricts people's fundamental rights but also threatens local and international security.⁹¹

Informational articulation of the gray zone regime. Legal ambivalence and spatio-temporal transformation are articulated through the informational dimension, which determines how actions are publicly presented and perceived by different audiences.

⁸⁹ "How Should Georgia Respond to Russia's Borderization?" Expert Comment, Georgian Institute of Politics, no. 5 (August 2017).

⁹⁰ "Kak vygliadiat pogranichnye upravleniia FSB Rossii v Abkhazii," *Sova.news*, March 14, 2019, <https://sova.news/tv/2019/03/14/kak-vyglyadyat-pogranichnye-upravleniya-fsb-rossii-v-abkhazii>.

⁹¹ Boyle, "A 'Little Berlin Wall' for All," 86.

Informational ambivalence is clearly evident in the origin and use of the term “borderization” in the Georgian context. The term was introduced by the EUMM in 2013 to describe physical marking and activity along administrative boundary lines.⁹² The first public uses of the term are recorded in EUMM press releases from May 2013, where the mission announces its intention to discuss the “issue of borderization” at the Geneva international discussions.⁹³ By 2017, the EUMM had formally articulated the term in its EUMM Monitor publication, defining it as “the establishment of physical infrastructure, surveillance and patrol systems along ABLs.”⁹⁴

The process began in 2009, but the term for it only appeared four years later – from international observers who regularly encountered this phenomenon during monitoring and needed a term to describe it in reports and diplomatic communications. After the term was established in EUMM documents, it was disseminated by the media and civil society organizations (CSOs) and gradually entered both official Georgian and international discourse.

The belated official reaction of Georgian state structures – the first cases of signs being installed were recorded in 2009, with sustained public discussion appearing around 2013–2015, and a detailed official statement from the State Security Service (SSS) only in 2021 – created a terminological vacuum that was filled from outside.⁹⁵ Official structures have not developed their own designation, and their attitude toward the term “borderization” remains heterogeneous and contradictory.

By 2021, the terminological uncertainty had become particularly apparent. The SSS statement indicates that the use of certain terms such as “zone of fear,” “border,” and “border movement” “undermines the state’s efforts to de-occupy and provokes fear among local residents.”⁹⁶ However, without offering an alternative, the text consistently uses the cumbersome construction “illegal so-called borderization,” repeating it nine times. The qualifier “so-called” signals a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the term, but at the same time

⁹² *EUMM Monitor*, issue 4 (April 2017): “Borderisation is a term introduced by the Mission to describe the physical markings and activities on the ground...”.

⁹³ EU Monitoring Mission, Press Release, May 31, 2013, https://eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/3429.

⁹⁴ *EUMM Monitor*, issue 4 (April 2017).

⁹⁵ Goga Aptsiauri, “Russian Troops Try to Shift South Ossetia Border Markers,” *Radio Tavisupleba (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)*, August 3, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_Troops_Try_To_Shift_South_Ossetia_Border_Markers/1781282.html.

⁹⁶ State Security Service of Georgia, “Official Statement on Illegal Borderization,” August 2021, <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/news/official-statement-on-illegal-borderization-august-2021>.

demonstrates the absence of another generally accepted designation. It is important to mention that in the Georgian public discourse of 2020–2025, the terms “borderization – creeping occupation” are often used as a synonymous package.⁹⁷

As shown above, the Russian side deliberately uses the international legal terms “delimitation” and “demarcation,” strategically appropriating legitimizing terminology. The result is a competition of frames, where the same phenomenon is described through:

“delimitation/demarcation” (Russian and de facto authorities’ frame), to appropriate legitimacy through international legal terminology;

“borderization” (EUMM, some Georgian officials, media), a term that is technical and institutional, but criticized by some journalists and human rights activists as a euphemism masking a land seizure;⁹⁸ and

“creeping occupation/annexation” (CSOs, media, activists) – a moral and political framework that qualifies the actions as illegal seizure of territory.

Information support for the borderization process is provided through orchestrated campaigns coordinated by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rossotrudnichestvo, a Russian state agency established under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, effectively functions as an instrument for “waging information warfare in favor of Russia” and applying “soft power” in territories outside the control of the Georgian central government.⁹⁹ Information operations are aimed at creating the appearance of legitimacy for the de facto structures and their actions, including borderization, as part of a broader strategy of information influence on Georgian society. Studies of the media landscape reveal the deliberate production of mutually exclusive frames of the same events in the Georgian information space.¹⁰⁰ The delegitimization of international observers and the narratives about “Western provocations” create an environment of distrust towards international organizations and CSOs that monitor territories adjacent to the occupied regions and implement projects to develop dialogue between

⁹⁷ Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Analytical Materials, 2023–2025. Civil Georgia, Reports, 2023–2025.

⁹⁸ “We Are Using a Glaring Euphemism,” *Georgia Today*, 2019, <https://georgiatoday.ge/we-are-using-a-glaring-euphemism>; Masho Lomashvili, “Erasing August: How Russia Rewrites Georgia’s Story,” *Coda Story*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/russia-georgia-august-war>.

⁹⁹ Mamuka Komakhia, “*Foreign Policy*” of the Russian-Occupied Regions of Georgia after the August 2008 War (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

¹⁰⁰ DFRLab / Atlantic Council, “Cross-Platform Disinformation Campaign in Georgia,” December 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dfrlab>.

the parts of a divided society. Such campaigns do not focus directly on borderization, but they shape the information environment in which the problem becomes less visible. When even the basic designation of the process remains a subject of competition more than ten years after its inception, it structurally hinders the formation of a unified national and international position.

The informational impact goes beyond terminological competition and affects the collective memory of the 2008 war. Journalistic investigations record a divided collective memory among residents of border villages. Some consider the war a “staged provocation,” some retain memories of Russian aggression, and others feel confused by conflicting narratives.¹⁰¹ According to these studies, the fear of publicly contradicting dominant positions in conditions of increasing political control makes it difficult to articulate alternative interpretations, creating an information environment where a multiplicity of narratives coexists with restrictions on their public expression. Borderization, therefore, occurs not only on the physical map, but also in the information space – the reformatting of collective memory about the conflict becomes part of the gray zone regime.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Georgian case confirms that borderization acts as a spatial mechanism of institutionalizing the status of the gray zone. Legal ambivalence, spatio-temporal transformation and informational articulation function as an integrated system of managed uncertainty. Sustained coercion below the thresholds of war while intentionally diluting the source of action creates a form of territorial control characteristic of contemporary conflicts.

Operationalizing the minimal core of the gray zone through mechanisms of legal ambivalence and spatio-temporal transformation allows for a systematic analysis of spatial practices of managed uncertainty. The structural relationship between gray zones and border spaces shows that border practices can constitute the core of gray zone strategy.

The focus on the strategic logic of borderization means that a detailed analysis of its impact on the everyday life of communities living along dividing lines has remained beyond the scope of this study. An ethnographic investigation of this dimension represents an important challenge for future work. The

¹⁰¹ Masho Lomashvili, “Erasing August: How Russia Rewrites Georgia’s Story,” *Coda Story*, August 7, 2025.

conceptual framework also requires verification on other cases of territorial gray zone practices to assess its applicability beyond the Georgian context.

Borderization reveals a fundamental challenge to the contemporary system of international relations. Traditional legal and institutional instruments are conceptually ill-equipped to respond to practices that systematically exploit their procedural limitations. Gray zone regimes are designed to remain in the gap between the categories on which response mechanisms are based. The legal status of territories remains in limbo. They are not recognized as independent, are not formally annexed, and do not have the status of temporary occupation with clear obligations. This situation allows the principles of territorial integrity to be undermined.

This study points to a possible transformation of the very nature of territorial conflicts. The territorial practices of the gray zone create a new form of spatial change. It is gradual, ambivalent and extended over time. This form may be more sustainable precisely because of its uncertainty. The final resolution of the situation depends on factors beyond the analytical reach of this research. Geopolitical change, the transformation of Russian foreign policy, and the evolution of the international community's position remain external variables. However, understanding how the gray zone regime produced by borderization operates, what mechanisms ensure its stability, and what vulnerabilities it creates remains a prerequisite for any attempts to transform it.

Studying borderization in Georgia offers a contribution to understanding how spaces of conflict, ambivalence and managed uncertainty are constructed and maintained. These processes require new analytical approaches and political strategies capable of working with the logic of uncertainty.