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# “De-Facto Borders” as a Mirror of Sovereignty. The Case of the Post-Soviet Non-Recognized States

Vladimir Kolosov & Maria Zotova \*

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**Abstract:** *»De-Facto-Grenzen‘ als ein Spiegel der Souveränität. Der Fall der postsowjetischen nicht-anerkannten Staaten«.* The crisis of statehood in many countries has resulted in the emergence of non-recognized states that have become an intrinsic feature of the world geopolitical order. Using the concept of bordering, we study a specific type of border that was shaped in the course of state-building processes and conflicts with parent states. Some “de-facto borders” are not stable; in addition, non-recognized states often do not control all their declared territory. Looking in detail at the situation in six non-recognized republics in the post-Soviet space, we show the asymmetry of their borders with the parent state and with the external patron. Comparing the basic socio-economic indicators by regions, we conclude that non-recognized states still lag far behind both their parent and their patron state. Citizens of non-recognized republics regularly visit border areas of the patron and parent states and spend a considerable part of their income there. This can contribute to the normalization of relations between adversaries, but at the same time can perpetuate the separation between them. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the barrier functions of the borders with parent states.

**Keywords:** Post-Soviet de facto states, border regime, cross-border economic discontinuities, international border, cross-border interactions, pandemic, De-Facto borders.

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## 1. Introduction

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The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the proclamation of new republics: Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Transnistrian

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Moldavan Republic (TMR). In 2014, as a result of an acute political crisis and armed clashes in Ukraine, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republics (LPR) were declared in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions bordering the Russian Federation.

The uncertainty over the status of the non-recognized republics and their internal political instability can give rise to the risk of destabilizing the entire system of international relations and regional security. In particular this is because none of the boundaries of these republics corresponds to ethnic borders (the only exception being the border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan). Therefore, these conflicts are particularly dangerous for neighboring countries and regions that may be involved in hostilities (Markedonov 2012). The territories of most post-Soviet non-recognized states (except for the DPR, the LPR, and Nagorno-Karabakh) include significant compact areas or settlements populated by the titular ethnic group of the parent state, located near the border with it. This means that no matter how cold or openly irreconcilable the relations of the non-recognized republics with the parent state may be, their authorities are forced to take into account the needs of these minorities in cross-border communications. Unstable borders still retain contact functions, even in periods of armed conflicts.

The borders of four non-recognized republics formed during the disintegration of the USSR match exactly (in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), or for most of their length, the political and administrative borders that existed at the time or relatively recently (Transnistria and, to a lesser extent, Nagorno-Karabakh). The experience of territorial autonomy in the recent past, even if it was extremely limited, and thus the collective memory of borders that separated "us" from "them" – the "Others" – plays a notable role in state building. These borders became part of people's ethnic and/or political identity (Ilyin, Meleshkina, and Melvil 2010; Vasiliev, Klyuchnikov, and Turov 2016). At the same time, their peaceful character remains fragile – a fact clearly demonstrated by the recent resumption of full-scale hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Studying the borders of de facto states, which have become an integral part of the geopolitical world order, is important for understanding the dynamics of modern state borders, especially their role in the formation of territorial identity. The borders of the non-recognized post-Soviet republics that were formed many years ago perform the same functions as the borders of legitimate states. At the same time, most of them represent a unique case of highly "asymmetric" contact lines between countries with incomparable demographic and economic potential (borders of the non-recognized republics with Russia). However, despite the lack of political status and high dependence on the patron state, they undoubtedly possess a certain actorness and use the regime and functions of the borders to their advantage.

The viability of the non-recognized states depends to a large extent not only on the assistance of an external patron but also on their ability to create and re-distribute economic and political benefits; that is, to acquire internal sovereignty (Caspersen 2012; Sebentsov and Kolosov 2012; Kolosov, Sebentsov, and Turov 2021). The ability to keep the population loyal to the political regime and to ensure a decent standard of living, public services, and employment for citizens are the most important criteria for the success of non-recognized states' claims for independence (Bakke et al. 2018; Dembińska and Campana 2017; Kolosov and Crivenco 2021). Strong internal sovereignty is seen as the most important premise for the growth of external sovereignty; that is, *de facto* recognition reflected in cross-border interactions with the outside world (Hoch 2018; Broers 2013).

The main objective of the current paper is to analyze the relationship between the border regime and functions, cross-border interactions, and the external and internal sovereignty of the post-Soviet non-recognized states. The objectives of the research comprise, first, to study the differences between the stability of the borders with the parent and patron states (the state from which a territory seceded and the state that provides political and other support to the seceded territory), depending on the geopolitical position, morphology, and other factors. Second, to consider the specificities of the borders of each post-Soviet non-recognized state, the border regime, and socio-economic discontinuities between them and the neighboring countries affecting cross-border interactions. Third, to assess the role of cross-border interactions in changes to external and internal sovereignty.

In the following sections, we accordingly aim to show the relationship between the current regime, the functions of borders with parent and patron states, and the external and internal sovereignty of the non-recognized republics. After a brief description of the origin and morphology of borders, the main socio-economic indicators between non-recognized states and neighboring countries at the national and regional levels are compared, and the impact of cross-border interactions on the situation in each republic is assessed.

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## 2. Types of Post-Soviet Non-Recognized States

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Most of the post-Soviet non-recognized states have borders with only two countries: the parent state and the patron state. On the one hand, this situation makes it easier for them to receive military and economic aid, but on the other hand, it aggravates their dependence on the patron state and restricts their room for political maneuvering. The authorities of the non-recognized state seek to make better use of the assistance of the patron state – as well as interactions with other countries – by regulating the functions and the regime

of the borders. At the same, these states need to resist military, economic, political, and ideological pressures from the parent state.

There is an obvious difference between the borders with the parent state and those with the patron state. Even in the absence of violence, the functions and regime of borders with the parent state clearly reflect the conflicting nature and vicissitudes of the relationships between the parties. The parent states consider such borders as internal administrative lines, while the non-recognized republics see them as international borders (Berg 2018). These boundaries are characterized by the consequences of broken transport links, blockades, and difficulties in communications. They often have a bizarre configuration and do not coincide with either natural or socio-economic boundaries (e.g., crossing cities and villages, depriving rural residents of agricultural land, and forming deadlocks on railways and highways). Numerous military contingents have been deployed along the ceasefire lines, checkpoints and engineering barriers have been set up, and armed incidents often occur leading to casualties. The former *de facto* border between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan was a rare example of a completely closed “frontal” border, with a special regime of the frontal zone on both sides and constant skirmishes. The border with the parent state may move, such as in the case of the border between the Donbas republics and Ukraine.

By contrast, crossing borders with a patron state that maintains the viability of a non-recognized state is usually associated with minimal formalities and, for their residents, a near total absence of them. Most of the citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a significant proportion of Transnistrians, and many inhabitants of the DPR and the LPR have Russian passports, thanks to which they have the opportunity to receive Russian pensions and social benefits and to participate in international projects and competitions. These borders are crossed by the most important routes for the survival of the non-recognized states. A non-recognized state often has a shared (or similar) legislation with the parent state as well as the same currency (the Russian ruble in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, DPR, and LPR; the Armenian dram in Nagorno-Karabakh). Complex legal and logistic schemes, forcedly used by the non-recognized state in foreign trade relations, rely on the infrastructure and intermediaries in the patron state. The share of borders with it and the total length of borders are important criteria for assessing the geopolitical position of a non-recognized state.

South Ossetia has the most difficult geopolitical position (table 1): its border with the patron state, Russia, accounts for only 16 percent of the total length. In addition, the relatively short border with Russia (74 km) runs along the arduous Main Caucasian ridge. There is only one checkpoint, on the so-called Transcaucasian highway connecting North and South Ossetia.

The Donbass republics also share a high proportion of their borders with the parent state, as a tortuous ceasefire line has resulted from hostilities. The

permeability of this border, passing through densely populated territory, is very high.

Another obvious difference is between borders where incidents are constantly occurring, and those along which the situation remains relatively calm. This is expressed, in particular, in a lack of changes to the border line, as well as in the long absence of armed clashes. Such sections of a border can be termed as stable. Important factors for their stability are the correspondence with the old political and administrative borders of the Soviet era and in the South Caucasus, with mountain ranges in sparsely populated and inaccessible areas. Borders with patron states, “old” borders with third countries that are not directly involved in the conflict, and sometimes also borders with the parent state are relatively stable. However, even along stable borders there can be areas with an increased risk of destabilization, such as along some short sections of the border between Moldova and the TMR. These are former ceasefire lines that go deep into the territory on each side.

One common feature of bordering in non-recognized states is the priority of security interests (Dembińska 2018). For example, the security of the border with Georgia is ensured by Russian border guards, who have protected it since the brief Russian-Georgian war in 2008. On the Moldovan-Transnistrian border, security is provided by multinational peacekeeping contingents on a contractual basis, and in other republics (except for the Donbas), by Russian peacekeepers. Among the acute security problems are the transit of passengers and goods through territories that remain under the control of the parent state and the frequently changing border regime.

The authorities of the non-recognized republics are striving to reach the “desired” borders, i.e., the borders of former Soviet territorial autonomies or regions. As a result of Russia’s intervention following the armed attempt by Georgia to reintegrate South Ossetia in August 2008, it gained the borders of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, establishing control over the Leningor (Akhlagori) region (about half of the population of which was Georgian). In the same month, Abkhazia ousted Georgian forces from the upper part of the Kodori Gorge and now fully controls the territory of the former Abkhazian ASSR. The leadership of the DPR and LPR declared the goal of establishing full control over the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

**Table 1** Border Regimes of Non-recognized States

	Total length of border (km)	Length of borders with parent state/patron state/other neighbors (km)	Share of closed borders (%)	Number of check-points on the border with parent/patron state/ other neighbors	Density of check-points per 100 km of the border	Border crossing regime
Transnistria	816	411/0/405 (with Ukraine)	0	28/0/13	6.8/0/3.2	Visa-free regime
Nagorno-Karabakh	660	220*; 375** /360*;0**/60 (with Iran)*	48*, 100** (except for the Lachin corridor)	0/2*; 1**/0*	0/0.9*/0*	Visa-free regime for CIS citizens (except Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan), Ukraine, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetian, Transnistria); a visa on arrival for others
Abkhazia	396	163/245	41	1/4	0.6/1.7	Visa-free regime for citizens of Russia, Nicaragua, Tuvalu, Transnistria, and South Ossetia; an electronic permit and a visa upon arrival for others
South Ossetia	465	391/74	84	4/1	0.3/1.4	Visa-free regime for Russian citizens, a double-entry or multiple Russian visa, and an official invitation from relatives or organizations in South Ossetia for others
Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)	372	140/232	62	1/3	0.7/1.3	Visa-free regime for Russian citizens, a double-entry or multiple Russian visa for others
Donetsk People's Republic (DPR)	380	210/170	55	4/4	1.9/2.4	Visa-free regime for Russian citizens, a double-entry or multiple Russian visa for others

\*Before the war in autumn 2020. \*\*After the signing of the Trilateral Ceasefire agreement of November 10, 2020.

At present, Transnistria is the only post-Soviet non-recognized state that does not have a border with the patron state (Russia) and shares more than 400 km of a common border with a third country (Ukraine). However, after the events of 2014, the new Ukrainian authorities, fearing the transformation of the TMR into a Russian springboard for the secession of the Russian-speaking regions of the South-East, blocked the border and began to actively support the efforts of the Moldovan authorities to reintegrate the country. As a result, the circle of the blockade of Transnistria was closed. Subsequent years brought relative relief, but the threat of complete economic strangulation of the TMR became constant. The only non-recognized state that – thanks to its access to the sea – has the opportunity to diversify its ties without the threat of outside interference, and thus to increase its external legitimacy, is Abkhazia.

Accordingly, the morphology, history of origin, physical and geographical characteristics of the borders, and the peculiarities of the territories they separate, largely determine the nature of interactions with the outside world, and consequently, the viability and sovereignty of non-recognized states.

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### 3. Borders, Economic Discontinuities, and Cross-Border Movements

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The functions of the post-Soviet non-recognized states' borders reflect the limitation of their external sovereignty. The main reason for this situation – the lack of political status – is made worse by the strong dependence on the patron state, the continental geographic location (except for Abkhazia), the impossibility or difficulty of transit through the territory of the parent state, and, lastly, the weak economic base. Nevertheless, similar to the countries legitimized by the international community, the non-recognized republics seek to use the border regime to regulate their external relations. The border regime is usually understood as the accepted norms of its protection and engineering equipment; the rules for crossing by persons, transport, and goods; conducting economic and other activities in the border zone; and resolving border incidents. The more open the border, usually the more active the external economic relations; the more intense the tourist flows and cross-border mobility of the population, the more attractive the territory is to external investors; and, ultimately, the greater the external sovereignty, the more opportunities there are for recognition in the future.

In conditions of limited external sovereignty, the viability of the non-recognized post-Soviet republics is determined mainly by internal sovereignty: the ethnic and political (regional) identity of the majority of citizens, their loyalty to the political regime, and the confidence in the favorable prospects for the



republic. The belief that the leadership of the republics have chosen the correct strategy is based on the dynamics of collective and personal well-being. The internal sovereignty of the post-Soviet non-recognized states can face many challenges. These include difficulties for economic development, pressure from the parent state and economic competition with it for the loyalty of citizens, and the instability of assistance from the patron states, Russia and Armenia, which themselves have significant difficulties associated with a deteriorating international situation.

Border regimes have a dual effect on internal sovereignty. On the one hand, the openness of borders enhances it since active external economic relations are the most important condition for strengthening the economy. Residents of the non-recognized republics have a vested interest in cross-border mobility that will increase the opportunities to raise incomes and visit relatives in neighboring and other foreign countries as well as make a wider choice of goods and services available. On the other hand, involvement in regular cross-border movements generate demonstrative effects, facilitating the comparison of the situation “here” and “there” and stimulating labor migration. Depopulation, in turn, serves as a vivid indicator of the decline of non-recognized republics’ competitiveness in the struggle for the loyalty of citizens and undermines the legitimacy of political regimes. In economic and migration exchanges with the outside world, non-recognized states are out-of-pocket: they not only lose residents but also material resources since people often prefer to spend part of their income in neighboring countries. Only the help of the patron states allows the leadership of the republics to make ends meet.

The regime and functions of the border mirror the constantly changing external and internal sovereignty of the non-recognized republics. They play an invaluable role in state-building and serve as a symbol of identity (a topic that is beyond the scope of the current paper). At the same time, they are the markers of significant, unfavorable socio-economic discontinuities. However, the situation varies considerably between the republics.

### Transnistria

Most of the border between Transnistria and Moldova runs along the Dniester River. Since some of the small sections represent a ceasefire line after a short “hot phase” of the conflict between the parties in 1992, there are seven villages with adjoining agricultural land on the left bank of the Dniester that are de facto under the jurisdiction of Moldova, though this side of the river is generally controlled by the TMR (graph 1, in the appendix). But the city of Bendery on the right, “Moldovan” bank (except the Varnitsa district) is also controlled by the TMR (Brazhalovich et al. 2017; Volkova et al. 2007). Thus, the demarcation line does not correspond with the borders declared by the

parties: the “state borders” of the TMR and the borders of the administrative-territorial units of Moldova (Temnikov et al. 2000). The peacekeepers’ posts, customs, and border checkpoints of the TMR, police stations, points of migration control of the Republic of Moldova, etc. are nevertheless located on the de facto border line (Vesti 2013).

The population of Transnistria is multi-ethnic with three main groups – Russians, Moldovans, and Ukrainians – each constituting approximately a third of the population. There are no significant mono-ethnic areas, although there are villages that are more or less homogeneous in terms of ethnic composition, particularly in northern districts with major Ukrainian populations.

The borders of Transnistria are the most open of all the non-recognized states. Foreign citizens could cross through nine international checkpoints with a valid Moldovan visa. In addition, citizens of Moldova and Ukraine could use the network of 19 local checkpoints, the densest in the post-Soviet non-recognized states, where checking procedures were quite formal (graph 1, in the appendix). At the same time, the border with Moldova was more barrier-free than the Ukrainian one.

This openness of the borders contributed to the growth of inbound “red” and extreme tourism; that is, the number of tourists looking to gain impressions by visiting a surviving “fragment of the Soviet Union” and a non-recognized state. The interest of tourists in visiting the TMR and other non-recognized states has been stimulated by the change in the traditional model of tourist consumption from “3S” (“sea-sun-sand”) to “3L” (“lore-landscape-leisure”). Disputed territories and zones of ongoing and past conflicts have become attractive places for visitors to gather unique experiences (Golunov and Zotova 2021).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the number of operating checkpoints has since mid-March 2020 been reduced to six on the border with Moldova and four with Ukraine. On the Transnistrian side, the border with Moldova was additionally reinforced with mobile posts in order to prevent the uncontrolled movement of citizens. Departure from Transnistria without the need to observe the self-isolation regime became possible after March 2020 only for a period of up to 12 hours with permission from the TMR Operations Headquarters (Point 2020). Of the 5,000 applications to leave that were made between March and August 2020, only just over 3,000 were approved. At the same time, the Moldovan authorities freely allowed entry by the residents of the left bank of the Dniester. Tiraspol’s tough decisions attracted criticism both from Chisinau officials and the ordinary residents of Transnistria, who regularly traveled to the territory of Moldova for everyday purposes (Leahova 2020).

During the first years of independence, the socio-economic situation in Transnistria was more stable than in the Republic of Moldova due to the higher potential for industry: a legacy of the Soviet era. Transnistria was one

of the most developed regions of the Moldavian SSR. In 1989, it produced about 35 percent of the latter's GDP, 56 percent of consumer goods, a third of agricultural products, and almost all the electricity (Kolosov and Zayats 2001). Large contrasts in the level of urbanization (38.2 and 70 percent, respectively) also affected the differences in socio-economic development between the right and left banks of the Dniester. Over almost 30 years of independence, the discontinuities on the Moldovan-Transnistrian border have changed. The population of Transnistria has declined faster than that of Moldova. In absolute figures, the demographic losses of Transnistria over the past 30 years (from 1990 to 2020) amount to 30.1 percent, or 241,100 people, compared with 26.6 percent, or 947,000 for Moldova. Both territories suffer from massive labor migration, diluting the population of working and reproductive age.

**Table 2** The Main Socio-Economic Indicators for Transnistria, LPR, DPR, and the Neighboring Regions of Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, 2018

Country/Region	Population (thousand inhabitants)	GDP per capita, 2018 USD (PPP)	Average wages, 2018 USD per month (PPP)
<b>Ukraine</b>	<b>42364</b>	<b>12601</b>	<b>1169</b>
Donetsk region*	4200	6866	1277
DPR	2260	no data	572
Luhansk region*	2167	2436	971
Kharkiv region*	2692	13029	1009
Dnepro region*	3228	17209	1167
Zaporizhzhya region*	1721	12861	1149
LPR	1438	no data	397
<b>Russia</b>	<b>146880</b>	<b>23361</b>	<b>1678</b>
Rostov region*	4220	13680	1 207
Transnistria	469	5784	717
Odesa region*	2383	10950	1056
Vinnysia region*	1574	10661	1028
<b>Moldova</b>	<b>3547</b>	<b>9661</b>	<b>666</b>
Soroca	99	no data	885
Floresti	85	no data	891
Soldanesti	41	no data	848
Rezina	50	no data	963
Orhei	124	no data	972
Criuleni	73	no data	929
Dubasari	34	no data	879
Chisinau	833	no data	1333
Anenii Noi	83	no data	949
Causeni	89	no data	819
Stefan Voda	69	no data	838

Sources: *Statistical yearbook 2019*. 2019. Tiraspol; *Statistical publication Regions of Ukraine 2019*. 2020. Part I, Kyiv.; *Regions of Russia 2019*. 2019. Socio-economic indicators. Rosstat. M.

Despite the negative processes, Transnistria still possesses significant resources and a relatively high-skilled and inexpensive labor force, but it is gradually losing its former advantage over the rest of Moldova in terms of living standards. At present, the TMR is approximately on an equal footing with its parent state, although the TMR does have some superiority over it in the availability and provision of public services as well as in the level of wages. However, it already loses out in terms of per capita GDP indicators (Crivenco 2017; table 2).

Under conditions of high dependence on foreign trade and the constant threat of a blockade, the openness of the border did little to reduce the economic vulnerability of the TMR and has in fact been one of the factors behind mass emigration. Many residents of Transnistrian cities work in Chisinau, where the level of wages and selection of goods and services is higher (Kolosov and Crivenko 2021).

### Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Almost 40 percent of the border between Abkhazia and Georgia runs along the mountain river of Ingur (or Inguri), where the flow of the river varies greatly depending on the season. At low water, it is easy to walk across in many areas, especially since for most of its length there are no engineering constructions. To date, there is only one road bridge across the Ingur River, where the main checkpoint is located.

This section of the border is adjacent to the Gal (or Gali) district of Abkhazia, which – like the neighboring regions of Georgia – is inhabited almost exclusively (some 98 percent) by Megrelians, a sub-ethnic group of Georgians speaking a specific dialect (graph 2, in the appendix). Megrelians make up the majority of refugees from Abkhazia who were forced to leave after the defeat of the Georgian side in the 1992–1993 war. Estimates of their numbers vary greatly, but it is most commonly assumed to be around 200,000. After the end of the 1992–1993 war, the Gal region has remained the most problematic for the Abkhazian authorities: there have been constant incidents, including invasions by Georgian militants, shootings, kidnappings, and murders.

Almost all residents of the Gal district are citizens of Georgia. They are more integrated into the Georgian society and state than into those of Abkhazian, receiving medical and educational services, buying goods, and using the opportunity to travel abroad on the Georgian side. The issue of granting them Abkhazian citizenship is one of the most vexed in the political life of the state. The Constitutional Law of Abkhazia “On Citizenship” permits double citizenship only with Russia, and residents of the Gal district can only obtain an Abkhazian passport if they refuse a Georgian one. However, its preservation is important for the Megrelians of Abkhazia – not only as symbols of identity, but also for pragmatic reasons. At the same time, according to Abkhazian law,

Georgian citizens are not allowed to cross the border without a visa. Many people take the risk of detention and fines by crossing illegally. The Megrelians of the Gal district have turned into second-class people, many of whom do not have a passport and cannot leave (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012). Thus, the consolidation of the Abkhazian political nation is postponed for the future, which damages the internal sovereignty and prospects for the recognition of the country.

A significant proportion of the Abkhazians have a negative attitude concerning the granting of Abkhazian citizenship – and accordingly electoral rights – to Abkhazian Megrelians, since this will significantly affect the ethnic balance in Abkhazian society. A temporary solution was found in the issuance of a residence permit to residents of the Gal district, giving them access to a social package in Abkhazian territory (e.g., pensions, benefits, study, the right to run a business and to work, including in government agencies – except for law enforcement) and at the same time preserving the opportunity for them to see relatives and receive social benefits in Georgia.

The barrier functions of the border with Russia that is vitally important for the development of tourism – the main area of specialization – are relatively limited. Abkhazia has around a million tourists per year (95-97 percent of them from Russia), although some 85-90 percent just visit the country for a one-day tour. Russian citizens crossing the border only require a domestic passport. The visa-free regime applies to citizens of five countries with which intergovernmental agreements on mutual travel have been signed, as well as citizens of Belarus and Kazakhstan (table 1). Additionally, all tourists (with the exception of Georgian citizens) entering as part of an organized group for a period not exceeding 24 hours are allowed visa-free entry. For other citizens, an entry permit is issued by e-mail or fax, and a visa can be obtained at a checkpoint. Crossing the border with Russia is now notably easier than a few years ago and there are three checkpoints in Adler: railway, road, and pedestrian. In addition, there is a sea checkpoint, Sochi – Gagra, for pleasure boats and catamarans. At the same time, in recent years the barrier capacity of the border with Georgia has increased: four out of six checkpoints, which were mainly used by the population of the border regions, have been closed.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the only steadily operating local pedestrian checkpoint on the border with Georgia (Ingur) has switched to “on-demand” mode. Under the conditions of quarantine, the humanitarian corridor for the return of citizens and residents of Abkhazia temporarily staying in Georgia was only opened four times. Although checkpoints along the border with Russia had also been closed and opened only on demand since early April 2020, on August 1 that year, the normal border crossing regime was restored.

The South Ossetian capital Tskhinval (Tskhinvali) – which is home to approximately half of the population – is located right at the border with

Georgia, only 100 km from Tbilisi (graph 3, in the appendix). Up to 2008, the Leningor (Akhlagori) district, with a predominantly Georgian population, gravitated towards the Tbilisi agglomeration, with which it had good road connections. After the inclusion (return) of Leningor (Akhlagori) in South Ossetia, the main road via the Georgian territory was blocked, and it was only possible to drive to Tskhinval via a difficult and long mountain road. The construction of the direct road was of strategic importance for the republic.

The republic is the most closed of all the post-Soviet non-recognized states. Formally, since 2010 Russians and citizens of the states that have the agreements on visa-free travel with the Russian Federation can visit South Ossetia without a visa. For citizens of other countries, a double-entry Russian visa is required. Nevertheless, all foreigners (except for Russians) need to have an invitation issued by the foreign ministry. On arrival, foreign citizens are requested to register with the Immigration Control Department within three days. The flow of visitors to the republic is carefully controlled by the local authorities and is carried out practically in a manual mode.

The situation at the border of the republic with Georgia has worsened. Since 2016, four simplified checkpoints have operated. In September 2019, and contrary to agreements, the Georgian authorities opened a new police checkpoint in the Znaur district of South Ossetia and increased their military presence. In response, the South Ossetians set up a checkpoint on their side but did not open it and closed the other checkpoints. Until the pandemic, only the Synagur checkpoint was used by residents of the Leningor region for travel to Georgia to collect pensions or for emergency or high-tech medical care. However, even this checkpoint has been closed since February 2020. The border was opened only a few times on special orders from the South Ossetian government to allow the passage of a few people to Georgia for reasons of force majeure.

Despite a partial economic recovery after recognition by Russia, the industrial potential of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is weak. They are comparable in terms of per capita GDP by purchasing power parity (in Abkhazia it is only 20 percent higher) but are substantially inferior to the average indicators for Russia (77 percent lower) and Georgia (58 percent lower). The differences with neighboring regions are less, although still significant: in per capita terms, Abkhazia GDP value is approximately 20-70 percent lower than the GRP in neighboring Russian and Georgian regions, and in South Ossetia – 40-75 percent lower (table 3).

**Table 3** The Main Socio-Economic Indicators for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Neighboring Regions of Russia and Georgia, 2018

Country/Region	Population (thousand people)	GDP per capita, 2018 USD (PPP)	Average wages, 2018 USD per month (PPP)
<b>Abkhazia</b>	<b>245</b>	5255	413
<b>Russia</b>	<b>146810</b>	23361	1678
Krasnodar region*	5603	16822	1299
Adygea*	454	9638	1054
Karachay-Cherkessia*	466	6675	976
North Ossetia*	702	7492	1035
<b>South Ossetia</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>4026</b>	<b>689</b>
<b>Georgia</b>	<b>3729</b>	<b>12680</b>	<b>1153</b>
Mtskheta-Mtianeti*	93	12108	883
Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti*	320	7860	819
Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti*	30	8642	535
Imereti*	507	8628	746
Shida Kartli*	259	7119	711

Sources: *Abkhazia in Numbers 2019*. 2020. State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia; *Regions of Russia 2019*. 2019. Socio-economic indicators. Rosstat. M.; *Statistical Yearbook of Georgia: 2019*. 2019. National Statistics Office of Georgia. Tbilisi.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia still lag notably behind the neighboring regions of Georgia and Russia in terms of per capita industrial production (50-90 percent lower). Nevertheless, thanks to exports, Abkhazia has come close to the neighboring regions of Russia in terms of per capita agricultural production (table 3). South Ossetia has not succeeded in achieving such success due to marketing problems and unstable transport connections with Russia as well as poor product quality and a lack of equipment. Its backlog from neighboring regions of Russia and from Abkhazia is 50-75 percent lower.

At the same time, South Ossetia is 40 percent ahead of Abkhazia in terms of average wages and incomes. The reasons are supposedly higher Russian assistance per capita and a larger proportion of employment in the public sector, especially in law enforcement agencies where incomes are relatively high. In 2019, Russian aid accounted for 83.1 percent of the South Ossetian budget. With regard to average wages and incomes, South Ossetia is similar to neighboring peripheral regions of Georgia. The lag behind the Russian North Caucasian republics and the Krasnodar Territory is more significant (30-45 percent lower).

In terms of per capita retail turnover in comparison with GRP per capita, Abkhazia lags notably behind neighboring regions. This indicator is Abkhazia is 10-90 percent lower than in neighboring Russian regions and 30 percent lower than the average indicator in Georgia. South Ossetia lags behind its

neighbors even more significantly (80-90 percent lower): the population largely survives thanks to subsistence farming.

These gradients affect cross-border mobility between non-recognized states and neighboring countries. Residents of Abkhazia, especially the border Gagra district, regularly travel to Sochi and other cities of the Krasnodar Krai to purchase goods that are cheaper and of higher quality (household goods, construction materials, some foodstuffs, etc.). Wealthier people travel to Russia on weekends for leisure and to shop in large shopping centers; in the low season they go to the resorts of the Krasnodar Krai. For residents of South Ossetia, the main reasons for travel are to visit relatives and for healthcare services. Shopping is not an important incentive to cross the border, although South Ossetians also buy goods in Russia on occasion. Traveling for healthcare services to both Russia and Georgia is nevertheless common. In Georgia, there are free treatment programs for residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The sharp asymmetry in the regime of the borders with the parent state and the patron, Russia, contributes to the strengthening of their dependence on it. At the same time, despite signs of their integration into the Russian economic and social space, the lack of broad international recognition means significant barrier functions of borders remain, and private foreign investment is hindered (including Russian), which in turn increases the risk of further economic lag.

### Nagorno-Karabakh

Based on the ethnic composition of the population, the communist authorities (with the consent of the Azerbaijani side) initially included these territories in Armenia. However, in July 1921, Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) was left within the borders of Azerbaijan with the granting of autonomy, presumably in the interests of rapprochement with Kemalist Turkey, which recognized the Soviets. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO) was created in 1923, but its borders did not correspond to ethnic ones: three districts with a predominant Armenian population and two with a significant Armenian minority were left outside the borders. Leaders of the Armenian majority in the NKAO protested against the deliberate – as they believed – policy of the Azerbaijani leadership to resettle the Azerbaijanis (Melik-Shakhnazarov 2009; Kolosov and Zotova 2020).

As a result of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict of 1988–1994, the Azerbaijani population was forced to leave the territory of the NKAO. Not only did 92.5 percent of the territory of the former NKAO come under the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), but also seven more districts of Azerbaijan, either fully or partially. They were declared a “security zone,” including Kelbajar and Lachin that separated Artsakh from Armenia. At the time, the only road between Armenia and Artsakh ran through the Lachin district.



Another was later built through the Kelbajar district. These territories were ironically called in Armenia “temporarily occupied – liberated forever.”

At the same time, Azerbaijan controlled small territories in the Martuni and Martakert districts of the former NKAO as well as the entire Shahumyan district and part of the Khanlar district (which entered the NKR during the conflict), or 15 percent of the territory declared by its authorities. Neither side considered the existing borders as fair, primarily because of ethnic cleansings and massive flows of refugees from both sides. In addition, Azerbaijan lost its access to the Sarsang reservoir (on the territory of the NKAO), which is important for irrigating the plains of Azerbaijan (Babayan 2019).

Before the new Armenian-Azerbaijani war in 2020, the NKR-Armenia border – thanks to the modernization of the M-11 Vardenis-Stepanakert and M-12 Goris-Stepanakert motorways – turned into a contact zone (graph 4, in the appendix). Control of people entering the republic at the checkpoints was very formal. A visit to the NKR was only possible from Armenia, but at the same time it was regarded by Azerbaijan as an illegal crossing of its border. The NKR has achieved some, albeit modest, success in attracting foreign tourists, mainly from the Armenian diaspora (about 5,000 each year). Visa-free entry was allowed for citizens of the CIS countries (except Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan), Ukraine and Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the TMR. Citizens of other countries had to obtain a free visa at the NKR permanent mission in Yerevan, directly at the border, or at the Foreign Ministry on arrival.

For almost 30 years of its existence, the NKR has shown stable economic growth. In the 2010s, Artsakh’s GDP began to increase annually by 10-11 percent – notably more rapidly than Armenia. The revenues and expenditure of the NKR budget were balanced thanks to subsidies from Armenia, officially termed “interstate credit.” Production cooperation developed between Armenian and Karabakh enterprises and, in fact, a single legal space was formed. All the foreign economic relations of the NKR were carried out through Armenia, with Karabakh products exported under the guise of being Armenian. By 2018, the GRP per capita and the average salary in the NKR were significantly higher than in two of the three neighboring *marzes* (provinces) of Armenia (table 4), although lower than in Yerevan. In addition, in terms of per capita GRP and wages (in PPP terms), the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic exceeded the indicators for neighboring regions of Azerbaijan adjacent to the de facto border. It still lagged behind Azerbaijan as a whole, as the country obtains significant revenue from the extraction and export of oil and natural gas (Kolosov and Zotova 2020).

**Table 4** The Main Socio-Economic Indicators of the NKR and Neighboring Regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan, 2018

Country/Region	Population (thousand inhabitants)	GDP per capita, 2018 USD (PPP)	Average wages, 2018 USD (PPP)
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>13475</b>	<b>1032</b>
<b>Armenia</b>	<b>2972</b>	<b>12898</b>	<b>963</b>
Syunik*	138	17401	1401
Vayots Dzor*	49	8 354	706
Gegharkunik*	229	5 498	652
Yerevan*	2973	20707	1163
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	<b>10127</b>	<b>14542</b>	<b>1121</b>
Daşkəsən*	34	9885	819
Göygöl*	62	5186	672
Goranboy*	100	4263	583
Tərtər*	102	3847	555
Yevlax*	184	4383	619
Bərdə*	151	5475	551
Ağcabədi*	130	7203	537
Beyləqan*	93	5179	555
Füzuli*	125	1705	591

Source: Uncontrolled Territories in the Modern World. Polis 128 (2): 31-45 (In Russian). *Socio-economic situation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in January-December 2018*. 2019. Stepanakert

As a result of hostilities that resumed at the end of September 2020 and were stopped by a trilateral ceasefire agreement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on November 10, Azerbaijan not only handed back all the occupied territories, but also a significant part of Artsakh. This included the second largest city of Shushi (Shusha), strategically located at high altitude, just 10 km from Stepanakert and on the only road between Armenia and Artsakh stipulated by the agreement: the Lachin corridor, 5 km wide and guarded by Russian peacekeepers. This road is apparently planned to be moved, bypassing the towns of Lachin and Shusha. The situation remains extremely difficult.

The new borders of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan established in November 2020 are controlled by Russian peacekeepers and are highly likely to become as closed as possible. The artificiality of the new borders, the vulnerability of transit connections with the patron state (at least without the extension of the agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia in 2025), and the complex interethnic relations make the political and economic prospects of the republic extremely uncertain.

### Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics

The actual border of the DPR and the LPR cut Ukraine off from the most urbanized, densely populated, and industrialized areas of the southeast, headed

by the regional centers of Donetsk (with a population of around 935,000 people in 2019) and Luhansk (about 450,000; von Löwis and Sasse 2021, in this special issue). Donetsk, together with the city of Makeyevka (with around 343,000 inhabitants), is the core of the largest urban agglomeration in Ukraine and, until 2014, was the country's main industrial center in terms of production value. The demarcation line – on which, until recently, shootings took place almost every day – passed along the western outskirts of Donetsk and another large city of the agglomeration: Gorlovka (262,000 inhabitants). The line left other significant cities within the DPR (Khartsyzsk and Yenakiyevo) but separated it from such important cities as Kramatorsk (now the center of the regions of Donetsk region under the control of Ukraine), Konstantinovka, etc. (graph 5, in the appendix). A similar situation has arisen near Luhansk: the line of demarcation runs along the northern outskirts of the city and its closest suburbs: Stanitsa Luhanska and the village of Schastie (Happiness), which became widely known for the fierce fighting in 2014. Part of the eastern border of the republics with the Rostov region of Russia coincides with the natural border – the Seversky Donets River, to the south – with the state border of Russia and Ukraine separating the Western (Ukrainian) Donbass from the Eastern (Russian) Donbass. A number of cities and towns on both sides are located at or near the border. In Soviet times, a single agglomeration was formed here; there were convenient services connecting its parts, many people worked on the other side of the border, and up to half of the families had relatives there. On the Ukrainian side, 85 to 95 percent of the population consider Russian as their mother tongue. The demarcation line cut off many large industrial plants in the DPR and LPR from consumers and sources of raw materials and components. As a result, some of them were closed, while others were largely reoriented to the Russian market. For instance, iron ore for the iron and steel industry now comes from Russia.

The barrier functions of the borders of the LPR and DPR with the parent state remain high. There has recently been frequent shelling on several sections of the contact line. Before the pandemic, crossing the line was only possible for Ukrainian citizens through five road checkpoints (four in the DPR and one in the LPR). Citizens of other states, including Russia, could cross the contact line from the Ukrainian territory after obtaining permission on the website of the Security Service of Ukraine. About 500,000 people passed through the checkpoints every month and crossing the border was difficult. In order to visit relatives on the Ukrainian side – and most importantly, collect benefits and pensions and withdraw cash – people stood in queues for hours, underwent humiliating checks, and were often forced to bribe border guards. Most of those crossing the borders were pensioners. Considering the extremely low level of social benefits in non-recognized republics (3,200 rubles, or about 40 euros per month in 2019), pensioners are not ready to give up their Ukrainian pension (Bakke et al. 2018).

The pandemic resulted in new restrictions for crossing the demarcation line. Since March 2020, travel from the LPR/DPR to Ukraine has only been possible for Ukrainian citizens registered on its territory in a “humanitarian corridor” mode. To enter the LPR/DPR, the Ukrainian side requests a pass issued by the Security Service, a paper certifying permanent registration in non-controlled territory, or a certificate from the Migration Service of Ukraine as well as, most importantly, a special permit from the DPR Interdepartmental Operational Headquarters or the LPR foreign ministry. According to experts, local elites benefit from this situation, earning money on cashing services and handling remote paperwork as well as collecting tribute from carriers, significantly limiting border crossings and redirecting all traffic through Russian checkpoints (Vishnevsky 2020). In the LPR, the only checkpoint near Stanitsa Luhanska has functioned relatively steadily throughout the entire period, although in fact the cross-border traffic has decreased from around 10,000 to 300-500 people per day. In the DPR, three checkpoints were closed and the number of border crossings through the only checkpoint – Yelenvka–Novotroitskoye, open for only a few hours – was limited to the minimum.

At the same time, the border of the republics with Russia remained open to all registered residents of the LNR/DPR. All the local checkpoints continued to function. However, entry into the territory of the LPR/DPR was significantly limited for Russian citizens: they were allowed to cross the border only for funerals of close relatives or for treatment, work, or studying on presentation of the relevant documents. Although third-country nationals could enter the republics from Russia on presentation of a double-entry Russian visa before the pandemic, such permits have been canceled since March 2020.

The hostilities led to the catastrophic collapse of the economy of “certain areas of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions,” as the Donbass republics are officially termed in Ukraine. The DPR’s economy shrank by about 2.5 times, and the LPR’s by 3.5 times. Although earlier they had been significantly ahead of other Ukrainian regions in terms of the main socio-economic indicators, GRP per capita in the DPR is now only 30-50 percent and wages only 50-60 percent; the LPR, respectively, is 80-85 percent and 30-40 percent lower (table 2). Such contrasts, combined with – according to various estimates – an uncertain status and ongoing hostilities along the contact line, led to a 40 percent decline in the population of the republics from 2015 to 2020 (LB 2015; Finance 2017). More than a third of the population currently living in the territory of the two non-recognized republics are pensioners. Most of the active population works on a rotational basis in Russia or Ukraine. Further, the residents of the districts bordering Russia have turned into frontaliers, who cross the border every day to work in the neighboring cities of the Rostov region in Russia (Zotova, Gritsenko, and von Löwis 2021).

In 2020, the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent tightening of border regimes have affected everyday life in the non-recognized states especially sharply, revealing many internal problems and contradictions. The current situation in most cases has been used by both the authorities of the non-recognized and those of the parent states in their own interests. The severity of the new border regime varies from maximum closedness, as on the borders of the LPR and DPR with Ukraine and the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Georgia (since March 2020, they have only been opened for a short time on a few occasions), to the relative openness of the TMR borders. At the same time, the mode of operation of checkpoints with the patron state, although restricted at the beginning of the pandemic, has subsequently been restored, albeit with some reservations.

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#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

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The border regime is at the same time a factor and a result of the cross-border interactions of non-recognized states and mirrors their specific features: concern for security, dependence on the patron state, forced isolation, and the desire to diversify external relations.

There are deep differences between the borders of the post-Soviet non-recognized republics with the parent state and the patron state (when such borders exist). Borders with the patron state correspond to the state or administrative borders that existed before their secession and are more stable. Throughout the entire period after secession, the processes of debordering have been observed in these states, in terms of the weakening of barrier functions and of the regime, primarily for citizens of the patron state and states allied with it as well as for nationals of third countries. Most of the non-recognized states are interested in visits by foreign politicians and public figures, journalists and scientists, specialists, and tourists, contributing to better knowledge about a *de facto* country and helping its external legitimation (Caspersen 2015). Borders with patron states have contact functions that are vital for the non-recognized republics. The structure and nature of interactions across these borders reflect the socio-economic processes taking place in the non-recognized republics, and hence their viability. Nevertheless, the citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia believe that the border with Russia, as a symbol of independence and a part of the internal sovereignty, should be preserved (O'Loughlin, Kolosov, and Toal 2015).

By contrast, borders with the parent state are often the contact lines for the parties on which dangerous incidents occur constantly. As a rule, these borders do not coincide with any previously existing ones; they can be unstable or even closed completely, such as the former border of Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijan (a rare case in the modern world). These borders are of great

symbolic significance, especially for the non-recognized states. International isolation, the rupture of cross-border communications with the parent state and its hostile actions, and the blockades significantly complicate the functioning of the economy and foreign trade for non-recognized states and limit the possibilities for socio-economic development. However, the functions of the borders with parent states also depend on “objective” constraints for interaction resulting from family ties of border area residents as well as from the need to solve common environmental or technological problems that compel the parties to maintain cross-border interactions. They contribute to the normalization of relations between adversaries, but at the same time they perpetuate the separation between them (Berg 2018).

Relations between Abkhazia and Georgia, South Ossetia and Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan represent particularly difficult cases of irreconcilable disputes over territories that a neighboring ethnic group believes to be their historical cradle (Yiftachel 1999). Each side perceives such conflicts exclusively emotionally and considers itself to be the victim. They lead to renewed violence. One of the conditions for overcoming such a situation is interaction between the parties, which improves their mutual perception and understanding.

In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno Karabakh, almost all the citizens – regardless of age, social status, and place of residence (except for residents of the Gal district) – are unanimously in favor of maintaining the border with the parent state. This boundary draws a line in space between the supporters of secession and “them,” the “aliens,” those who have not abandoned attempts to force the breakaway republic back into their fold by unleashing a new war. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the overwhelming majority of Abkhazian residents welcomed the invitation of Russian border guards to protect the republic (O’Loughlin, Kolosov, and Toal 2011).

Most of the citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia also welcomed the processes of “borderization”: the installation of border signs and the construction of physical barriers along some sections of the border with the parent state, used for propaganda purposes on both sides. On the Georgian side, the border with the breakaway republics is interpreted as a fundamental borderline between the rule of law and of chaos; the “Europe” that Georgia seeks to enter, and the territory occupied by imperial Russia; modernization and archaism (Boyle 2016; Toal and Merabishvili 2019). Fundamentally different interpretations of the common history, causes, and course of hostilities during the period of the struggle for independence have a strong impact on the geopolitical vision of the world and, over time, in the minds of the citizens of non-recognized states, which increasingly legitimizes the border with the state they were formerly part of (O’Loughlin and Kolosov 2017).

The post-Soviet non-recognized states lag behind both the patron state and, in most cases, the parent state in terms of basic socio-economic indicators.

They are clearly losing the economic competition with them (with the partial exception of Transnistria). Our study confirms Pål Kolstø's conclusion made about 15 years ago: post-Soviet non-recognized states remain economically inherently weak, and the main reason for their viability is the ability to keep internal sovereignty and successes in identity-building as well as the support of a strong patron (Kolstø 2006).

The lack of significant economic progress can potentially affect the loyalty of citizens to a political regime and has a negative impact on the viability of non-recognized states. The situation, however, can be softened by the neighborhood of the non-recognized states with weak peripheral regions of the parent state and other neighboring countries. As a result, local economic ruptures may not be as large. Some economic successes associated with the support of the patron state and the functioning of competitive enterprises – when their products are in demand abroad – also make the contrasts less striking. The situation is also eased by the cross-border travel of residents in the non-recognized republics, allowing them to meet their everyday needs through access to cheaper and better goods and services in order to partially compensate for the low level of income. The greater lag of the non-recognized republics in per capita retail turnover than in per capita income and average salary shows that their citizens spend a significant portion of their earnings in the border districts of neighboring states.

In the context of the pandemic, the non-recognized states closed their borders, primarily those with the parent states but partly also those with the patron countries. The reasons for such decisions are different, and this is the subject for a special study. It is possible that the reason is the desire to limit the expenses of citizens in neighboring countries under the conditions of the economic crisis and fears of the collapse of healthcare systems due to the “import” of infection. Nevertheless, the decisions have caused great discontent among the residents of the non-recognized states, especially in the Gal district of Abkhazia and in Transnistria. The cessation of communications between the non-recognized republics and their parent states for a long time, whatever the cause, does not contribute to the (at the least) slow restoration of trust in them. In turn, this greatly limits cross-border interactions. However, in early autumn 2020, Abkhazia and South Ossetia opened their borders with Russia for the movement of citizens in both directions, while the borders of the Donbass republics for leaving to Russia have never been closed.

The pandemic has thus significantly increased the barrier functions of the borders with parent states, most often on the initiative of the non-recognized states themselves. According to local experts, by blocking movements across borders, local elites extract additional profits through gray schemes and limit the outflow of capital. However, the closure of the borders causes acute discontent among the population, as it deprives significant social groups of

resources for survival. Ultimately, this factor could significantly affect the stability of political regimes and the viability of the non-recognized states.

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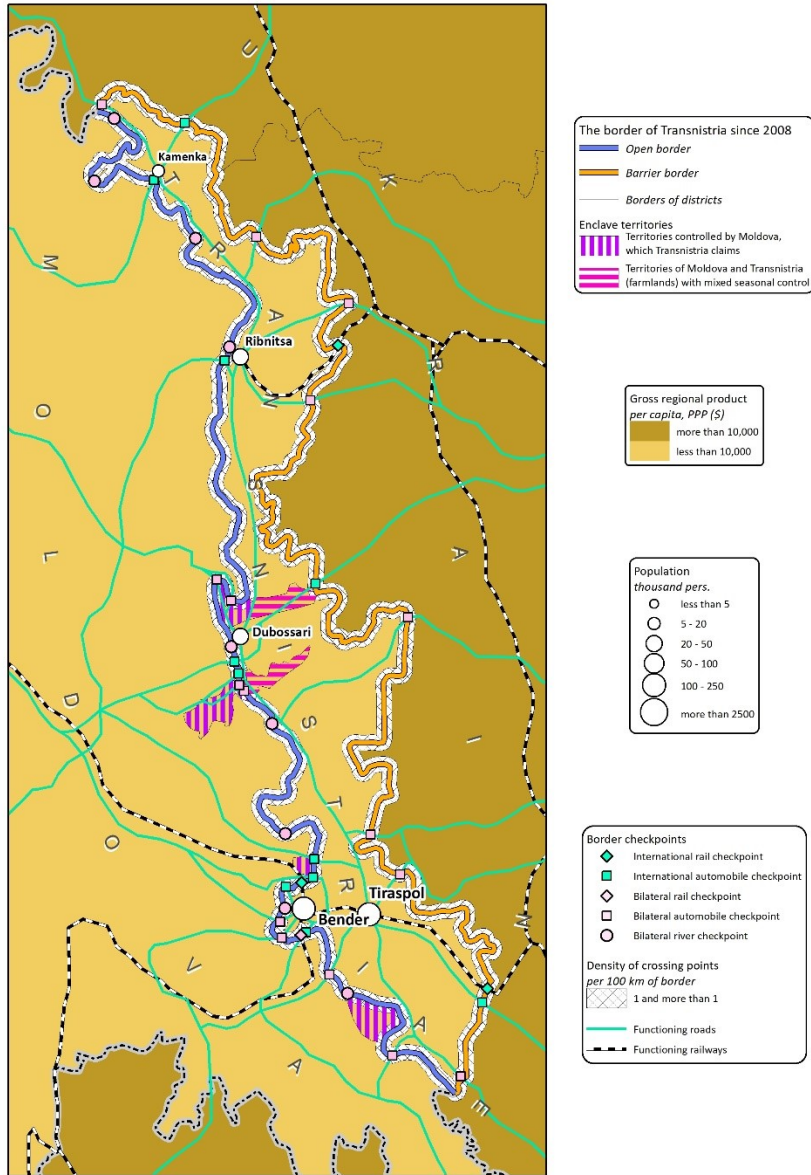


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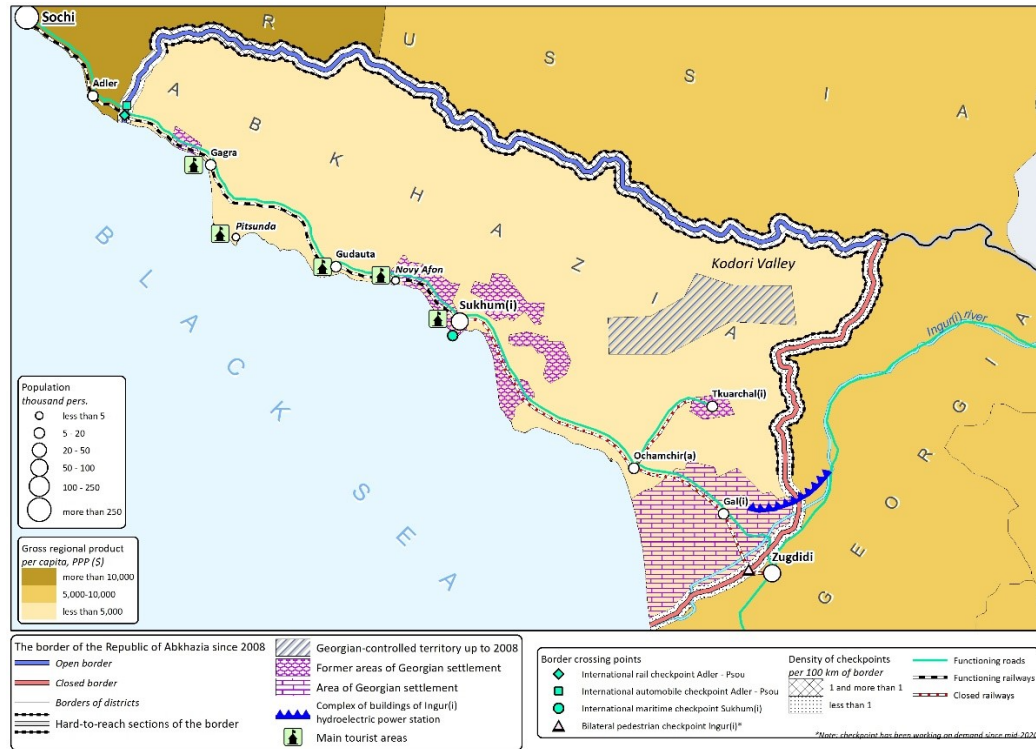
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# Appendix

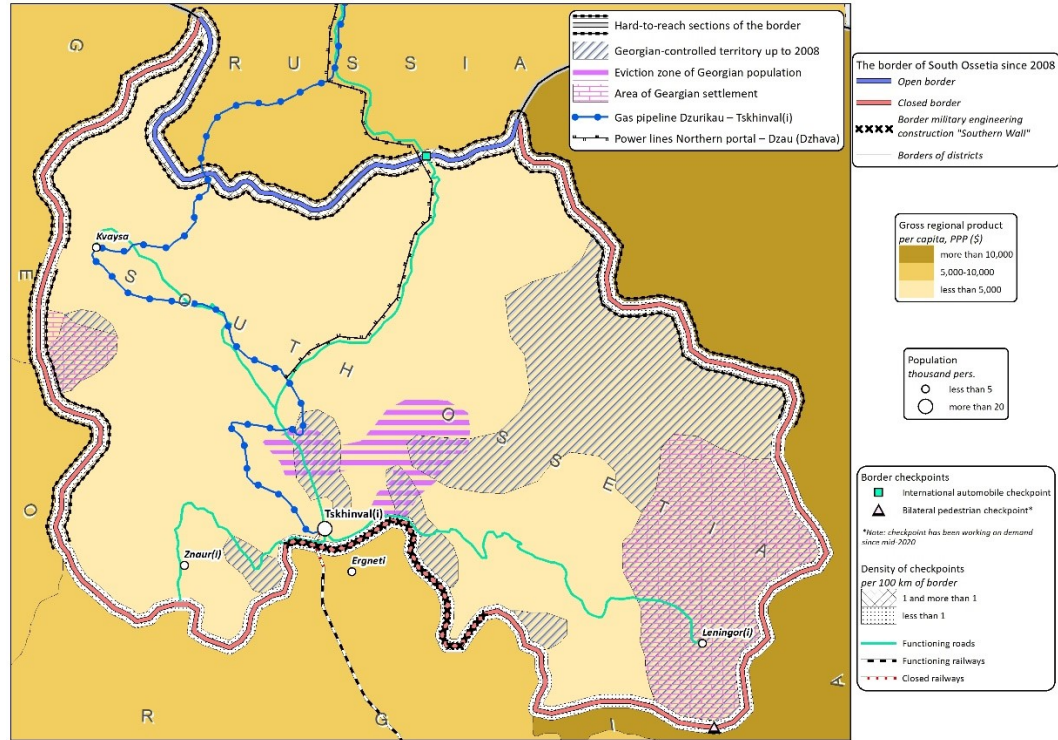
**Graph 1** De-Facto Border between Transnistria and Moldova



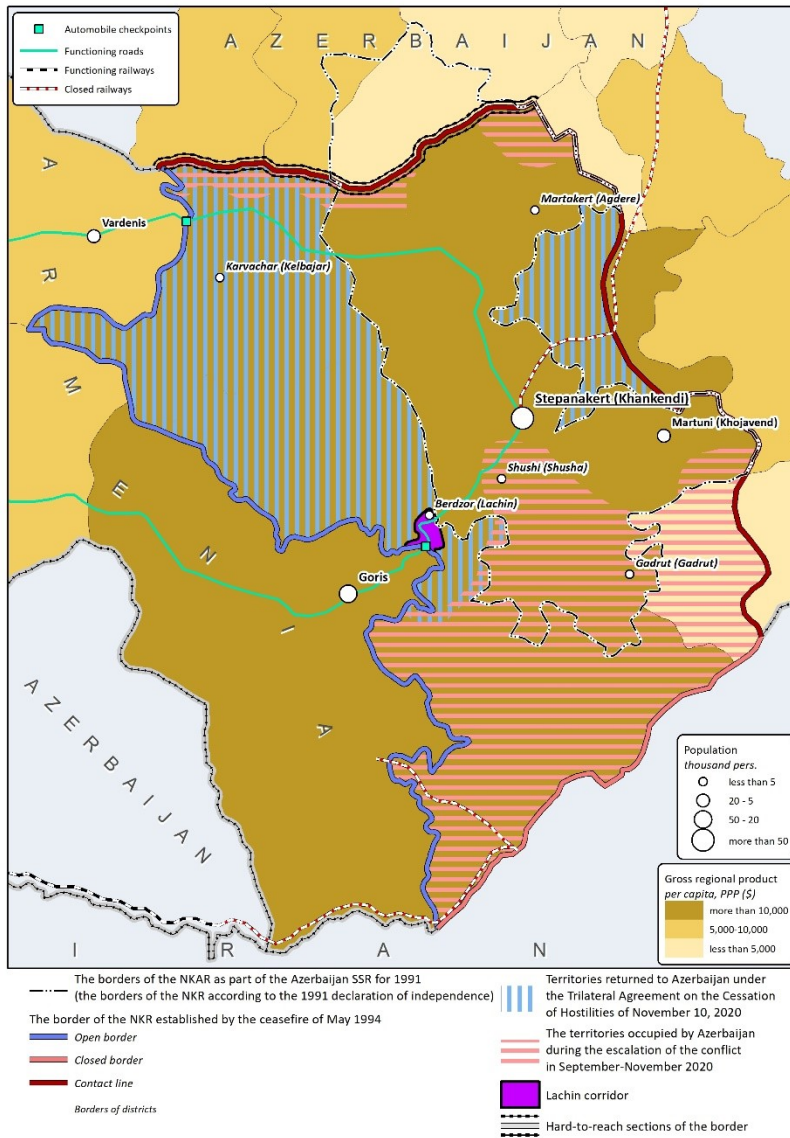
**Graph 2** De-Facto Border Between Abkhazia and Georgia



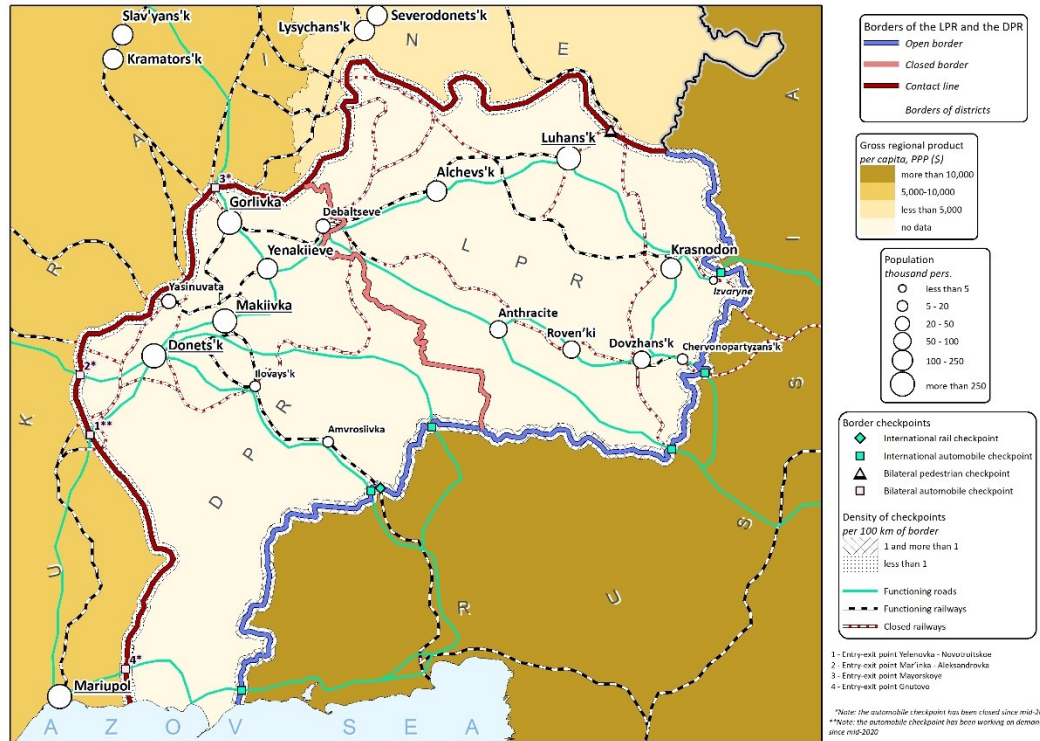
**Graph 3** De-Facto Border between South Ossetia and Georgia



**Graph 4** De-Facto Border between Armenia and Azerbaijan



**Graph 5** De-Facto Borders Between Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, Russia, and Ukraine



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doi: [10.12759/hsr.46.2021.3.178-207](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.46.2021.3.178-207)

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