

## TRANSNISTRIA'S MEDIA IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Sergei Zveagintsev

The media in Transnistria, an unrecognized, self-proclaimed republic on the territory of Moldova, remain under the control of powerful political interests. State media outlets as well as the private television channel TSV present the same view on all issues, from political to economic topics. But it has not always been like this. In-fighting between elites in recent years has completely redrawn the media landscape, shuttering some publications and changing the editorial line of others.

### Print media: Preserved since Soviet times

Transnistria is one of a few remaining territories where print media have kept their readership and significance. More than half the republic's population is middle-aged or older—lacking computer skills or access to the internet—and thus prefer to subscribe to or purchase newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

Most newspapers distributed in Transnistria already existed during Soviet times. *Slobodzey News*, for example, has been around for 85 years. The few exceptions to this include *Pridnestrovie* (the state newspaper), *Gomin* (a Ukrainian paper), *Adevarul Nistryan* (a Moldovan paper written with Cyrillic letters) and *Novoye Vremya* (a paper from the city of Bender). These are all products of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (the official name of the territory, PMR).

Previously, it was city and regional committees that established and published city and regional publications; currently it is local administrations as well as local councils of deputies that fulfill this role.

There are seven municipal print publications in Transnistria: *Dnestrovskaya Pravda* (Tiraspol), *Novoye Vremya* (Bender), *Slobozia Vesti* (Slobozia and the surrounding region), *Novosti* (Ribnitsa and its region), *Dawn of Transnistria* (Dubassary and its region), *Druzhba* (Grigoropol and the region), *Dnistr* (Kamenka and its region). They are distributed about one to three times per week on a regular A2 newsprint paper.

All of these publications, except Dubassary's *Dawn of Transnistria*, are financed from local budgets. With limited success, they also find additional financial support through publishing advertisements and announcements.

Several years ago, municipal media staff were cut by half, from 14 to seven employees. At a meeting of the Public Chamber, the chairman of the Union of Journalists of the PMR Natalia Vorobyova complained that the change will make it impossible for municipal media to fulfill their duties. The Union of Journalists tried to resolve the issue by turning to the State Media Service for assistance, but its head refused to get involved in the conflict.

<sup>1</sup> "Демографическая картина Приднестровья" ("Demographic snapshot of Transnistria"), *Demoscope Weekly*, No. 591-592, March 24, 2014.



1990 - 2015 - Tiraspol by Maxence Peniguet, Flickr, CC BY 2.0  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/maxxp/20651939512/in/photostream/>

As of 2018, only one independent newspaper - *Good Day*, which is produced in Ribnitsa - remains. It is a popular paper and mostly publishes articles about culture and entertainment.

The once-independent paper *A Person and Their Rights* was on the verge of closing due to financial problems during President Evgeny Vasilievich Shevchuk's tenure, who was in power between 2011 and 2016. It was produced only periodically and in small numbers. In 2016, during the run-up to the presidential election, however, the newspaper underwent a complete metamorphosis. Thousands of editions were distributed for free on the streets, severely criticizing Shevchuk's regime. Following the victory of Vadim Krasnoselsky, Transnistria's current president, the publication recovered and no longer faces any financial difficulties.

Only one party-affiliated newspaper, *Obnovleniye (Renewal)*, remains. The newspaper aligned with Revival

(*Vozrozhdeniye*)—a movement founded by Shevchuk in 2010—closed, along with the movement itself, when Shevchuk's presidency came to an end.

The editorial policies of Transnistrian media are oriented towards Moscow. In 2014, Transnistria's State Service Media and Russia's Ministry of Communications and Mass Media signed a memorandum of cooperation. This document provides for "the implementation of joint projects and programs in the field of communications, information technology and the media" and declares "Russian and Transnistrian support to the media to publish information on the friendly relations between the two states."<sup>2</sup>

## Television

Television in Transnistria is represented by the state television *Perviy Pridnestrovskiy*, the municipal Bender TV station; the private channels Television of Free Choice (TSV, affiliated

2 "Отчет Министерства иностранных дел Приднестровской Молдавской Республики о проделанной работе за 2014 год" ("2014 Annual Report, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Transnistria"), February 6, 2015: <http://mfa-pmr.org/ru/QCC>

with the Sheriff holding group, Transnistria's most prominent company and the force behind the Renewal political party), and LikTV (broadcasting from Ribnitsa); and the first Transnistrian internet television, Dniester TV in Bender.

Bender's city channel began broadcasting on November 7, 1997, transmitting popular new videos. According to an order by the head of the state administration of Bender, Tom Zenovich, BTV in January 1998 became part of the newly created Office for Television, Broadcasting and Printing in Bender. At that point the Office employed around 50 people. Following an "optimization" that took place during Shevchuk's time, the head of the state administration of Bender, Yuri Gervazyuk, reduced the number of employees to five, with an additional ten listed as technical personnel.

TSV was registered in 2006 as a noncommercial partnership and editorial office of mass information. Its founders, Viktor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly, also control Sheriff, which employs up to 20 percent of the republic's private sector and has interests in, among other, spirit manufacturing, oil and petrol, telecommunications, and banking.<sup>3</sup> The channel represents the interests of the Renewal party, the majority party at the local and Supreme Council level.

The internet TV and radio station Lik belongs to the Ribnitsa Tele-Radio Company Lik that was registered as a legal entity on November 15, 2001. It broadcasts news about Ribnitsa and is regarded in the region as a channel without any political bias.

And finally, Dniester TV was launched in August 2004 by Grigory Volovoy, together with an eponymous radio station. In the 1990s, Volovoy and Andrei Safonov published an opposition publication titled *New Newspaper*, which was discontinued later. Dniester TV follows in the footsteps of *Novaya Gazeta* (an independent paper that closed shop in 2010) and remains the most critical and only truly independent outlet in the republic.

## Online media

Transnistrians are active on social media. In recent years, online forums have turned into real alternatives to print and broadcast outlets. Transnistria's coverage in foreign media appears on these forums, as well as unofficial information regarding events and rumors. Forum members are often critical towards the authorities, but elected officials, experts, and current and former civil servants also take part in heated political discussions.

During President Shevchuk's time, several social media forums assumed the role of actual electronic newspapers, such as

the Transnistrian Public Forum ([forum.pridnestrovie.com](http://forum.pridnestrovie.com)), which has a user base of around 10,000—a solid number for the region. In the middle of May 2013, the Forum, along with several others, was blocked on Shevchuk's order. After assuming his position in 2011, Shevchuk actively interacted with Transnistrians on his own site but that practice eventually waned. Nevertheless, lively discussions about events in the region continued on such sites unless the authorities took measures to curtail their use. The Transnistrian Public Forum was the first to close and on May 8, 2013, after the Security Services (SBP) ordered all Transnistrian providers, including the biggest in the republic, InterDnistr (under the Sheriff's control), to block access to the remaining internet forums, such [forum-pmr.net](http://forum-pmr.net), [forum.dnestra.com](http://forum.dnestra.com), [forum-pridnestrovie.ru](http://forum-pridnestrovie.ru), [forum-pmr.com](http://forum-pmr.com), [forum-pmr.ru](http://forum-pmr.ru) and a number of others. The providers responded to the SBP's demands within 24 hours. Direct access to a list of resources on the territory was blocked and sites were only accessible through anonymizers such as Tor, or from outside of Transnistria. Readers could only find out about the blocking in Moldovan media («Ъ-MD» and Point.md),<sup>4</sup> where articles stated that the forums had been steadily gaining strength for years.

Evgeny Zubov, who at that time headed the State Service for the Media, denied President Shevchuk's involvement in closing the forums. But by clearing the information field of unwanted "players," the authorities "streamlined" the media market and restored the dominance of official media.

## Conditions for journalists

In Transnistria there is no specific, censoring institution whose staff would read every edition before publication or view each broadcast before releasing it to the public. There is simply no need for a censoring body, as key people are placed in influential positions and would not allow any deviation from the official party line.

Journalists, especially those working with independent outlets, face obstacles in accessing information. Even though Transnistria has Law "On Media", the authorities can deny nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), foreign outlets, and citizens themselves access to information. There are no court cases addressing the issue and officials have yet to be punished for denying someone access to public information.

Journalists often face discrimination in the courts. In a 2016 case, for example, a journalist from *Novoye Vremya* (Bender) was not allowed to participate in his own hearing after the judge, the defendant, and his lawyer petitioned for the journalist's dismissal.

3 Aleksandr Litoy, "Between Real and Imitation Democracy: Elections in Transnistria," *Open Democracy*, October 29, 2015: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/alexander-litoy/between-real-and-imitation-democracy-elections-in-transnistria>

4 "В Приднестровье не намерены мириться с закрытием интернет-форумов" ("Transnistria Will Not Tolerate the Closure of Internet Forums"), *Point.md*, May 18, 2013: <https://point.md/ru/novosti/obschestvo/v-pridnestrovje-ne-namereni-miritjsya-s-zakritiem-internetforumov>; "Больно форумные стали" ("Forums Have Fallen Ill"), *Compromat.ru*, May 15, 2013: [http://www.compromat.ru/page\\_33398.htm](http://www.compromat.ru/page_33398.htm); "Слово в защиту слова" ("A Word in Defense of the Word"), *Wordpress.com*, July 9, 2013: <https://sivakovds.wordpress.com/2013/07/09/komersant-md-slovo-v-zashchitu-slova/>

Some NGOs—such as Media Center (founded by Luiza Doroshenko), *A-Priori*, and Interaction have their own media outlets (most often websites),<sup>5</sup> and various NGOs organize trainings and seminars on investigative journalism. New authors are already appearing on social networks and on NGO websites, demonstrating a dynamism on the market and allowing for the emergence of new outlets in the future.

## Why fight against the media?

The media landscape turned into a battleground in Transnistria during a recent fight between the president and the Supreme Council of Transnistria, which took place between 2013 and 2016. This included the pre-election period and local council, Supreme Council, and finally presidential elections. The situation was so heated that, in meetings with candidates in 2015 and during the 2016 presidential election, voters demanded that candidates “stop pouring mud on each other.”<sup>6</sup>

It was the first time such a situation occurred in Transnistria. During the presidency of Igor Smirnov (the first president of the republic, in power from December 3, 1991 to December 30, 2011), the branches of government worked together. But as soon as Evgeny Shevchuk replaced Smirnov in 2011, confrontation broke out between the president and the Supreme Council. The conflict did not come as a surprise as Shevchuk had had a falling out with Sheriff and therefore Renewal, the party represented by the majority in the republic's legislature and local councils.

The media were thus divided into two camps: a “pro-presidential” and “pro-parliamentary” (meaning pro-Sheriff), which led to a “battle of compromise” between the executive and legislative branches of power.

The conflict was characterized by open declarations of “war,” for example that which the Ministry of Internal Affairs made on November 25, 2015. In an official statement, the Ministry claimed, “In recent times, media outlets have transmitted and published materials in which the authors convey false information, thus damaging the reputation of law enforcement agencies, as well as the honor and dignity of police officers.”<sup>7</sup> The ministry added that in the TV program *A Step Forward*, a candidate for the position of deputy, Oleg Leontev, openly testified about pressure, and even persecution, facing his colleagues within law enforcement bodies. This program was broadcast on the Sheriff-affiliated TSV, which defended the interests of the Supreme Council.

In early February 2016, the power struggle spilled over to state media in Transnistria, and deputies from the Renewal Party demanded that Shevchuk review the “the issue of restoring the Supreme Council among the founders of state-owned media.”<sup>8</sup>

Representatives from the parliamentary majority and the president quarreled over who would take control of the TV channel *Perviy Pridnestrovskiy*, Radio 1, Radio *Pridnestrovie*, news agencies *Novosti Pridnestrovie* and *Vesti PMR*, as well as the newspapers *Pridnestrovie*, *Adevarul Nistryan*, *Gomin*, and *Trade Union News*. At the time, these outlets all served as exclusive administrative resources for Yevgeny Shevchuk; while the Supreme Council controlled the private channel, TSV, and the newspapers *Renewal* and *A Person and Their Rights*. Thousands of newspaper copies were published and often distributed free of charge, which the executive branch could not afford, even if much of the state budget went towards media. Shevchuk allocated significant amounts from the regional budget each year to finance broadcast and print media. Despite Transnistria's large budget deficit, in 2015, the allocated amount was 32 million Transnistrian rubles (about \$3 million), and in 2016 it reached over 45 million Transnistrian rubles (about \$4 million).

In 2013, the president even went as far as to invite Elena Pakhomova, a journalist from Chisinau, to fill in the post of editor in chief of *Perviy Pridnestrovskiy*. Still, Shevchuk and the executive branch lost the information war. In December 2016, Sheriff protégé Vadim Krasnoselsky became president, unseating Shevchuk after a mere five years.

## Shuffling and castling

Following the 2016 elections, the intra-elite struggle resumed, bringing new changes to the media. Earlier, Shevchuk had replaced key figures in Transnistria's outlets. Now, the Sheriff-backed president executed a new round of replacements, including leadership at the State Mass Media Service, the Transnistrian Television and Radio Company, the newspaper *Pridnestrovie*, and Bender paper *Novoye Vremya*. In 2018, the newspaper *Trade Union News* was closed altogether.

In January 2016, Shevchuk appointed Inna Deleva, who had previously worked for the state-run enterprise *Pridnestrovskaya Gazeta*, to head the State Mass Media Service, which replaced the former Ministry of Information and Telecommunications. The mass media service, as it is referred to by journalists, is subordinate to the government of the republic. On December

5 See for example: <http://mediacenter.md>, <https://apriori-center.org/ru/>, and <http://ngointeraction.org/main/ru>

6 “Evgeny Shevchuk, ‘Выход из кризиса законодательной власти – в открытом диалоге’” (“Evgeny Shevchuk: The Way Out of the Crisis of Legislative Power is Open Dialogue”), *Novosti PMR*, September 30, 2016: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/16-09-30/evgeniy-shevchuk-vy-hod-iz-krizisa-zakonodatelnoy-vlasti-v-otkrytom>;

President Evgeny Shevchuk's comments on the domestic political situation, May 20, 2016: <https://tv.pgtrk.ru/ru/news/20160520/44169>

7 “Официальное заявление МВД ПМР” (“Official Statement of PMR”), November 25, 2015: <https://mvdpmr.org/vazhnaya-informatsiya/17959-oficialnoe-zayavlenie-mvd-pmr.html>

8 “Вадим Красносельский, ‘Если СМИ называются государственными, то должны выполнять государственные функции’” (“Vadim Krasnosel'skiy: If we are calling the media public, then they must fulfill state functions”), The Supreme Council of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, March 2, 2016: <http://www.vspmr.org/news/supreme-council/vadim-kranoseljskiy-esli-smi-nazivayutsya-gosudarstvennimi-to-doljni-vipolnyatj-gosudarstvennie-funktsii.html>

21 of the same year, however, Deleva retired and left for Russia shortly after the presidential elections.

Right afterwards, Lidiya Kolodka replaced Deleva at the helm of the service. While Deputy Chairman of the Government of the PMR Alexei Turcan declared that she “has extensive experience and organizational talent,”<sup>9</sup> Kolodka had been previously mainly known for managing the election headquarters of President Krasnoselsky. In the past two years since her appointment, her most memorable achievement was the organization of a flash mob, in which employees from the Ministry of Internal Affairs were filmed from a helicopter dancing to zumba. The material was later posted on the ministry’s website. Kolodka has allegedly failed to meet with any representatives of the print media, even though journalists have repeatedly asked her to do so. The employees of local city and regional newspapers had already encountered serious problems during the presidency of Yevgeny Shevchuk.

In 2012, Shevchuk replaced Igor Nikitenko, who had overseen the state-owned *Perviy Prednistrovskiy* for 11 years, with Irina Dementieva, a teacher at the Transnistrian State University. In the same year, the state television and radio merged as the Transnistrian Television and Radio Company (PGTRK), with Dementieva remaining director. After the presidential election in 2016, another reshuffle took place—Dementieva left her position as well as Transnistria, and Igor Nikitenko returned to head *Perviy Prednistrovskiy*.

There were changes on the newspaper market as well. During Shevchuk’s presidency, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Pridnestrovie* was professional journalist Vladimir Koval. In January 2017, Alexandr Karasev took his place. Karasev had worked as director of the Tiraspol College of Commerce, but was presented as a “literary employee” of the newspaper *Dnestrovskaya Pravda* (though there had been no such post in the official organizational structure) and a previous editor of the Soviet-times newspaper *The Trade Laborer*.

The Bender newspaper *Novoye Vremya* also changed its editor-in-chief in 2017. Its former editor-in-chief Grigoriy Volovoy had attained the biggest distribution among official state newspapers and thus received an offer from the paper’s founders—the state administration and chair of the city council—to resign. “They did not explain to me why I should do this, and therefore, I refused,” Volovoy

explained.<sup>10</sup> Following his refusal, the founders announced a competition to fill the post of editor-in-chief of *Novoye Vremya*. The competition was conducted with gross violations; the eventual winner had neither plans for the development of the paper nor a draft budget as required in the job posting. Nevertheless, he was allowed to compete and win.

### Case Study: Trade Union News become Transnistria's Trade Unions

The fate of one paper called *Trade Union News* (as part of the Federation of Trade Unions of Transnistria) perfectly sums up the recent changes that took place in Transnistria. The paper suspended distribution in 2018.

*Trade Union News* was originally registered in 1995 as a periodical designed to cover the activities of the Federation of Trade Unions of Transnistria (FPP). It subsisted mainly on subscriptions from the main trade union organizations. In 2010, near the end of Smirnov’s presidency, the newspaper was turned into a limited liability company, with Lyudmila Koval—the wife of Vladimir Koval, head of the Shevchuk-controlled state newspaper *Pridnestrovie* from 2011—as its director and simultaneously its editor. In 2016, the newspaper was re-registered by Koval as the founder, but according to Viktor Ivanchenkov, the current chairman of the FPP, this action had been taken without the knowledge and consent of the FPP’s Presidium.<sup>11</sup> The certificate of registration for *Trade Union News* was nevertheless issued to the new listed founder in accordance with the requirements of the Media Law.

During Shevchuk’s time, *Trade Union News* found itself on the president’s side, and for example in 2013 wrote about a dispute between council members in Bender.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as soon as President Krasnoselsky came to power and ended the conflict between government branches, deputies in the Supreme Council legally awarded the FPP the right to use the word “trade union” and its derivatives. In other words, only the Federation of Trade Unions of Transnistria could allow any newspaper to be called *Trade Union News*.<sup>13</sup> According to Volovoy, in this way

9 “Государственную службу средств массовой информации возглавила Лидия Колодка” (“The State Media Service was led by Lydia Kolodka”), December 22, 2016: <http://gssmi.gospmr.org/206-gosudarstvennuyu-sluzhbu-sredstv-massovoj-informatsii-vozglavila-lidiya-kolodka>

10 Author interview.

11 “ФПП вернет себе статус учредителя газеты “Профсоюзные вести” (“The FPP will regain the status of founder of the “Trade Union News” newspaper”), *Novosti PMR*, October 18, 2017: <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/17-10-18/fpp-vernyot-sebe-status-uchreditelya-gazety-profsoyuznye-vesti>

12 “После драки кулаками не машут?” (“Don’t waiver after a fight?”), *Trade Union News*, September 30, 2013: <http://profvesti.org/2013/09/28/11493>

13 A) The inclusion of the word “trade union” in the name of a legal entity or in the name of a mass media outlet, as well as words derived from it, is only allowed with permission granted by the republican interindustry union of trade unions, on the basis of an application by a legal entity or founder of a mass media. (Law on Trade Unions, Rights and Guarantees of Activities).

B) The application for registration of a mass media outlet using the term “trade union” or words derived from it must have the consent of the republican interindustry union of trade unions to use the word “trade union” or any derivation thereof in the media outlet. (Law on Media)

the authorities got rid of the unwanted editor-in-chief because “Lyudmila Koval took the side of the previous president Yevgeny Shevchuk during the election campaign.”<sup>14</sup>

In exchange for *Trade Union News*, in 2018 the FPP established a new, weekly newspaper *Trade Unions of Transnistria* and registered it with the State Mass Media Service of the PMR. The FPP appointed Ekaterina Tkachenko as editor-in-chief; previously she had been the editor of the newspaper *Tekstilshchik*, affiliated with CJSC Tirotext, the chief media relations specialist for the state administration of Tiraspol, and has also worked in the administrative department of the Council of the FPP.<sup>15</sup>

According to the FPP’s website, “the editorial department of the newspaper will function as a structural division of the FPP. All rights to it will belong to the Federation. The editorial board of the Federation will approve all published materials and approve editorial plans.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the paper will be subject to censorship.

## Conclusion

Transnistrian newspapers have been steadily losing readers, as shown by cuts year after year. There are several reasons behind this process, including the growing price of each issue (due to an increase in the cost of monopolistic services such as mail and printing), and the shrinking number of pensioners, who traditionally rely on newspapers for information. Most importantly, however, Transnistrian newspapers are losing their relevance as they are compelled to strictly follow the requests of their founders, local authorities. Transnistrian television has been also losing its credibility with viewers as almost all of its programs are “commissioned” by the authorities.

Young people prefer to get their information from the internet, and Transnistrian authorities are not yet in a position to control this area. This was shown by President Shevchuk’s failed attempt to shut down popular online forums: users simply flocked to new sites. The emergence of full-fledged online newspapers allows readers not only to receive new information, but also actively discuss it. This is a moment in Transnistria, when such discussions could potentially have the power to influence decisions made by the authorities.

- 14 “Депутаты не стоят на месте – форматируют “Профсоюзные вести” (“Deputies are Not Standing Still – They are Formatting Trade Union News”), *Dnestr.tv*, October 19, 2017: <http://dnestr.tv/6031-deputaty-ne-stoyat-na-meste-formatiruyut-profsoyuznye-vesti.html>;  
 “Прощай газета ‘Профсоюзные вести!’” (“Farewell, Trade Union News newspaper!”), *Dnestr.tv*, February 6, 2018: <http://dnestr.tv/6273-proschay-gazeta-profsoyuznye-vesti.html>
- 15 “Вышел в свет первый номер газеты Федерации профсоюзов Приднестровья” (“The First Issue of the Newspaper of the Federation of Trade Unions of Transnistria was Published”), 25 April, 2018: <http://gazeta.gospmr.org/?p=6754>
- 16 “Новая газета ФПП” (“New FPP newspaper”), *FPP PMR*, April 26, 2018: <http://www.fpp-pmr.org/85-news/513-novaya-gazeta-fpp.html>



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