

INFORMATIONAL SPACE IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGION – MEDIA THAT DIVIDES OR UNITES?

Victoria Rosa

Introduction

For over 30 years, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova have lived in two different media environments as a result of the long-lasting “frozen” conflict in the breakaway Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.¹ Although Moldovans on both sides of the Nistru River live in the same country, the residents of the Transnistrian region perceive the other side as abroad, as they read different interpretations of the same historical and current events and encounter specific sources of disinformation in regional media. In this context, media not only represents an issue discussed at the table of negotiations in the 5+2 format, but also a weapon used to shape perceptions within communities, spread disinformation, promote propaganda, and divide the country. This is possible because the legal framework in the Transnistrian region doesn’t demand the minimum guarantees for ensuring that quality information is independently provided, failing to grant basic rights and freedoms.

The 2022 *Freedom in the World* report considers the unrecognized region “not free.” In accordance with its isolationist policy, the Russian-backed breakaway region continues to seek self-determination from Moldova, thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.² This isolationism applies particularly to those spheres which keep the Transnistrian region population hostage to private and corporate interests. In reality, the region has closely adopted the illiberal Russian legal framework and implemented similar practices related to human rights and liberties. This has led to a restrictive media environment and limited personal and political freedoms, as evidenced by violations of the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of media. By failing to actively promote counter-narratives in the breakaway region, Moldova’s constitutional authorities have tacitly contributed to the so-called creation of the “Transnistrian nation,” which continues to be advertised and promoted in the local media outlets tied to the secessionist authorities.

Media Environment in the Transnistrian region – A View from Inside

The isolationist policy of the secessionist authorities in the Transnistrian region has molded the region’s media environment. The unrecognized regional leaders use media

outlets as a propagandistic tool to legitimize their own political agenda of self-determination. For years, discussions on liberalizing the media environment in the Transnistrian region and offering possibilities to journalists and media institutions – be they public or private – to access the region have failed. Understanding the power of mass-media, the

local secessionist authorities maintain full control over the public media ecosystem in the region as the “last bastion” of their cause.

Journalists and media institutions in the region face rigorous editorial control, as local security services strictly supervise and monitor their activity. Moreover, the local public media’s editorial policy is coordinated and precisely follows the Russian Federation’s informational policy. In 2014, the local Transnistrian region public media service signed a memorandum of collaboration with the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Communications.³ Among the limited number of media outlets in the region are some entities which claim to be independent. However, taking into account the regime’s tight control over the region, many outlets may be affiliated with certain political or business figures. Freedom of speech is thus not viewed as a human right and does not hold value. Every initiative or journalist seeking to enjoy or promote this fundamental freedom is subjected to restrictive measures.

Local media NGOs representatives mention that in the Transnistrian region the media institutions are mainly financed out of the local budget or Sheriff holding company. Due to the practically non-existent advertising market, media institutions, outlets or individual projects on social media survive either under the control of the authorities and business/political affiliation or foreign development assistance. The media “overprotection” in the region leads to several opposing trends. On one hand, this contributes to the increased self-censorship of journalists and the slow disappearance of genuine journalists and journalism in the region. On the other hand, this has also led to the emergence of underground media outlets and alternative methods of delivering a different kind of information related to both political and socio-economic developments.

The former sentiment is echoed by journalists and CSO representatives in the Transnistrian region. One journalist notes, “Journalists who decide to join the local public media understand pretty well that they will not practice journalism”.⁴ Director of Tiraspol-based Media Center Luiza Dorosenco adds, “Journalists working in the media financed from the budget and Sheriff holding, can be named specialists providing informational services rather than authentic journalists”.⁵ Among the most stringent issues faced by journalists in the Transnistrian region include the increasing secrecy of public information, lack of access to public information, inefficient media legal framework and the lack of capacity to act as journalists and serve the public, and no institutional or civil society tools to provide and ensure safe haven for journalists.

With respect to the latter trend, social media and social groups in the region are one important tool used by individuals to provide analytical reports or a second opinion. If previously Odnoklassniki was the most popular social media channel, now, according to local sources in the Transnistrian region, Viber, Telegram and Facebook groups

are gaining ground. Nonetheless, this type of information delivery to the public does not go without risks. Most of the time individuals turn to indirect form of criticism of the regime fearing persecution. One case of imprisonment for this particular reason has already been registered, according to the statements of the local media NGO representative. “An unwritten rule for the participants in social media groups is to avoid direct criticism and use alternative methods to express their thoughts; otherwise, they could be found guilty of extremism.”⁶

Media Consumption and Obstacles to the Emergence of Critical Thinking

The media consumption profile of the Transnistrian region’s residents does not differ much from that of the rest of the country’s citizens. People mostly prefer to follow the news by watching local and Russian TV channels, paying particular attention to entertainment programs. Citizens are also increasingly referring to internet sources for information. Those in the breakaway region regularly catch up on developments through online media reports, blogs, and social media. Regardless of the source of the information, many uncritically accept the content of the reporting. The majority of those living in the breakaway region consider these broadcasters and writers objective, which partially explains the success of the isolationist policy promoted by the secessionist authorities.⁷

Digital TV is also very popular, though it does not contribute to a free flow of information and instead fosters the segregation of information. Interdnestrom, a company under Sheriff holding, is the single provider of Digital TV, imposing a particular range of TV channels on the population. Having no alternative to Digital TV, beneficiaries have access primarily to Transnistrian TV channels – Pervii Pridnestrovskii, TSV and the Russian Federation TV channels. Moldovan or Ukrainian channels require additional payment. IP TV is also available, with two additional providers being registered – Link Service and Monitoring R&D Centre, both of which operate in Bender.

Print media and radio also offer the population few alternative perspectives on local and regional issues. Print media, as is the case in the rest of Moldova, is disappearing in the Transnistrian region. There remain three main print publications in the region which are supported by the local authorities and feature stories amenable to those working in regional public institutions. The three are as follows: the daily newspaper (published in Russian) *Pridnestrovie*, and two weekly newspapers *Adevarul Nistrean* and *Gomin* (published in Romanian and Ukrainian). The newspaper *Gomin* is usually used as a teaching material for Ukrainian language classes. Radio is a bit more popular than traditional newspapers, but again most listen to Russian music/entertainment radio stations which are less focused on news.

TV channels are popular among the elder population while internet sources and social media attract the younger generation and the middle-aged population. According to a sociologist in the region, youth for the most part rely less on TV as a source of information. Conversely, for the elderly, TV channels and radio still remains the first source they turn to as a credible source. This picture also explains why the information provided by the secessionist authorities via local public media is not so much contested. Having a specific Soviet type of mindset, people generally accept the information they receive as objective. Without having developed the habit of critical thinking, the elder population believe the information they watch or read every day. As one journalist in the Transnistrian region says: “Critical thinking develops when the information received via TV channels does not coincide with the living conditions...people do not understand what proper information means.”⁸

Conversely, the younger generation, which has the possibility to explore internet resources and access different types of information and readings, develops a feeling of doubt. As Dorosenco puts it: “Citizens trust the media less and less and try to find information of interest to them using social networks. But even there they can expect “fake” news. And they usually don’t know how to check the information. Media literacy of the population is the problem. Schools and universities do not teach this.”⁹

The Impact of the Pandemic and so-called “Presidential” Elections

The pandemic and the so-called presidential election in 2021 have only exacerbated the politicization of the media environment in the region. Purveyors of disinformation and fakes have particularly concentrated on the origin of the coronavirus as well as global, regional and local treatments/vaccines for the virus. The pandemic became an additional issue used to divide the two banks, as disinformation originating in the Transnistrian region portrayed the rest of Moldova (the right bank of the Nistru River) as an enemy impeding the delivery of vaccines to the region.¹⁰ This line of misinformation gained momentum, although ten percent of all vaccines delivered to Moldova went directly to the Transnistrian region.¹¹ Controversies over the “right” vaccine to administer to the population also took a geopolitical turn, pitting Western vaccines (AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and Moderna) against the Russian Sputnik vaccine. In part due to this serious disinformation campaign, the region’s local authorities began the vaccination process late and were met with an overwhelming wave of antivaccination sentiments. Even those who were willing to get the jab mainly waited until they could receive the Sputnik vaccine.

The reduced mobility and desire to obtain crucial information made the local authorities more eager to promote certain artificial informational trends taking advantage of the general

societal anxiety. One of the most widespread fake news stories related to Covid-19 was that Moldova had blocked deliveries of medical assistance to the Transnistrian region thus creating an economic and humanitarian blockade that had isolated the territory.¹²

Nevertheless, a large part of the population, observing the discrepancies between the information received via the usual sources and that coming from other sources, started to search for more alternative sources. Attention was given to Russian language media outlets on the right bank of the Nistru River which are easy to find online, such as NewsMaker.md.¹³ One of the most important results of the pandemic was that individuals began questioning the information provided by the local authorities and explored the larger context and opposing sources.

The same trend was observed during the so-called “presidential elections” in the Transnistrian region. The gap between the information received from the local authorities and the actual reality, as well as the situation in the neighbouring villages on the right bank of the Nistru River and the information provided by friends, neighbours, and ordinary people from other countries, has made residents of the Transnistrian region doubt their leaders and look for alternative sources of information. Nevertheless, the lack of media literacy and restricted access to other media outlets is reducing the speed of public awareness of disinformation. The demographic breakdown of the region additionally impacts the general awareness of disinformation. The elderly and younger people are predominantly a public less capable or eager to change views or search for more details.

On December 12, the residents of the Republic of Moldova living in the Transnistrian region were called to participate in the so-called “presidential elections.” Coming as no surprise, Vadim Krasnoselski won a second term, with 79.4 percent (113,620 people) of votes cast in his favor.¹⁴ Both the constitutional authorities in Moldova, as well as the international community, refused to recognize the electoral cycle, legally noting it as null. According to the existing data, 35.2 percent of residents in the Transnistrian region cast their votes in an artificial electoral process. Compared to previous such exercises, the turnout decreased more or less by 10 percent. The number of spoiled ballots ended up to be quite high – 12,520, the invalid ballots representing partly a protest vote.¹⁵

The use of social media in this particular case reflected the new societal trend in the region. Intentionally posting the spoiled ballots on social media can be regarded as a manner of expressing discontent with both the electoral process and the regime. Even those residents of the Transnistrian region who participated in the so-called elections were frustrated with the lack of even an attempt to pretend to organize a genuine electoral process with electoral campaigns and counter-candidates. Though Serghei Panzari was listed on the ballots as a candidate (the only counter-candidate), he

was neither present during the electoral campaign period nor on the election day.¹⁶ According to one anonymous journalist and civil society representative, “Generally, people do not believe the information provided by the authorities on elections. It was very easy to understand that the Electoral Committee was falsifying the data and they didn’t even bother to hide it.”¹⁷

Concluding remarks

The closed media environment maintained for more than 30 years has contributed tremendously to the emergence of an artificial bubble so-called the “Transnistrian nation,” which is promoted with ferocity nowadays by the separatist leaders in Tiraspol both inside the region and at the table of negotiations in the 5+2 format.¹⁸ A new generation of citizens of the Republic of Moldova grew up being indoctrinated and turned against their own country by the means of the fourth power – the media. By neglecting the isolationist media space, the Republic of Moldova lost an important battle – the battle for the minds and hearts of its citizens who are stuck in the “Soviet environment” with reduced power to withstand the authoritarian secessionist local regime.

The aging of the population, emergence of new media tools, and the long-lasting pandemic have all left a mark on the Transnistrian region media space, opening a window of opportunity for alternative information to be considered. In order to seize the moment, the Moldovan constitutional authorities should consider the following:

- Observe and analyse closely the media space and emerging trends in the Transnistrian region, as well as monitor the development and dissemination of conflicting narratives. Provide alternative information, a second opinion and analytical reports that would serve to debunk fake news, propaganda and disinformation. Due to the large number of Russian speakers on the left bank of the Nistru River, offering the information in Russian would serve to attract the attention of the readers. At a follow-up stage, Romanian language literacy could be introduced via media outlets, with innovative methods being adjusted to the local population and specific needs;
- Address political, economic and societal/community challenges which people on the left bank of the Nistru River face, offering valuable information and solutions to their problems. By serving to offer assistance on the right bank of the Nistru River in all issues related to daily life, an informational hub would serve as a practical resource for people to get information and receive proper services from the national authorities. This could help increase trust in the constitutional authorities and offer easier access to public information;
- Set up and offer safe spaces for people in the Transnistrian region to express themselves and provide

valuable information on the developments in the region, exchange ideas, and verify information. These safe spaces could be used as platforms for disseminating truthful information and at the same time introduce elements of critical thinking, journalistic methodology, and ways to identify verified information and sources;

- Initiate thematic groups on social media including citizens from both banks of the Nistru River to address the most stringent dividing narratives and provide alternative views, opinions, and sources. The pandemic context could serve as a pilot initiative;
- Initiate regular news coverage on the situation in the Transnistrian region at the National Moldovan Broadcasting Service both in Romanian and Russian languages. Private media institutions could also be encouraged, as part of the reintegration policy program. As an example, a unique news portal reporting on the situation at the moment in the Transnistrian region is www.zonadesecuritate.md;
- Humanize the media reports, address the issue of the people’s daily life and cover the social challenges that the conflict has triggered. Develop a wide network of specialized journalists in conflict-related materials, especially the Transnistrian conflict, by engaging journalists or aspiring journalists from the left bank of the Nistru River;
- Continue to encourage mirroring and confidence-building media projects and disseminate them to the larger public on both bank of the Nistru River, thus challenging many of the existing conflicting narratives and offering solutions for peaceful coexistence.

Endnotes

- 1 The terminology used in the paper follows the recommendations of the Republic of Moldova's Bureau for Reintegration.
- 2 *Freedom in the World 2022*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>
- 3 [Antti Sillanpaa](#), [Nadine Gogu](#), [Igor Munteanu](#), [Ion Bunduchi](#), [Viorel Parvan](#), [Marian Cepoi](#), "The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Other Ramifications," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, December 9, 2016, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/moldova_report_public_2nd_edition_17-07.pdf?zoom=page-fit
- 4 Anonymous interview, journalist & representative of a media NGO in the Transnistrian region
- 5 Interview with Luiza Dorosenco, Director of the Tiraspol Media Center
- 6 Anonymous interview, journalist & representative of a media NGO in the Transnistrian region
- 7 Anonymous interview, sociologist in the Transnistrian region.
- 8 Anonymous interview, journalist & representative of a media NGO in the Transnistrian region.
- 9 Interview with Luiza Dorosenco, Director of the Tiraspol Media Center.
- 10 Victoria Rosa, "Disinformation Muddles Transnistrian Conflict Resolution", August 26, 2020, *IWPR*, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/disinformation-muddles-transnistrian-conflict-resolution>
- 11 The population of Transnistria makes up roughly ten percent of the total population of Moldova (4,000,000). Olga Gnatcova and Stela Untila, "Voi spune sincer", *Krasnoselski i-a multumit Maiei Sandu pentru livrarile de vaccin in Transnistria*, June 23, 2021, *Newsmaker*, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/voi-spune-sincer-krasnoselski-i-a-multumit-maiei-sandu-pentru-livrarile-de-vaccin-in-transnistria-video/>
- 12 Rosa, "Disinformation Muddles Transnistrian Conflict Resolution"
- 13 A Russian language online news portal.
- 14 "Vadim Krasnoselski castiga asa-numitele alegeri din stanga Nistrului, pe fonul celei mai mici prezente la vot," December 13, 2021, *Zona de Securitate*, https://zonadesecuritate.md/vadim-krasnoselski-castiga-asa-numitele-alegeri-din-stanga-nistrului-pe-fonul-celei-mai-mici-prezente-la-vot/?fbclid=IwAR2bujoYXpam2X-bl7fQhdTeBq2RZ50CYj8oh9WknRivpnm9tnQE9f_7l
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 "Associated Trio Security Monitor," Issue no. 3, November – December 2021, *EAP Security Forum*, 5, <https://www.eapsecurityforum.md/publications/eap-security-monitor/november-december-2021-associated-trio-security-monitor/>
- 17 Anonymous interview, journalist & representative of a media NGO in the Transnistrian region
- 18 *The Transnistrian Conflict: 30 Years Searching for a Settlement*, *SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security No. 4*, 2021, <https://www.ui.se/forskning/centrum-for-osteuropastudier/sceeus-report/sceeus-report-no-4/>



Victoria Rosa

Victoria Rosa is an expert in international relations, European affairs, security & defence, conflict studies & gender issues, civil society development, with a particular focus on EaP countries, EU, Transatlantic cooperation, NATO, and Russia. She served as Security and Defense / EU affairs Adviser to the Moldovan Prime Minister Maia Sandu. Prior to that, she held the position of Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (currently a member of the APE Board and Council of Administration). From April 2018 until July 2019, Victoria moderated the daily evening political talk-show "Punctul pe azi" on the National Romanian Television (TVR), Moldovan branch. Between 2005-2010, Rosa worked as a lecturer at the International Relations Department, Moldova State University as well as joined the activity of various nongovernmental organizations. Over the last 16 years, Rosa has provided expertise to national and international organizations in the framework of various thematic programs (Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, UN Women Moldova, Freedom House, Austrian Ministry of Defense, TAMPERE Peace Research Institute, etc.). She holds a BA and MA degree in international relations, political and administrative sciences from the Moldova State University. She is fluent in English, Russian and Romanian (native) languages. Rosa is a 2017 Alumni of the Marshall Memorial Fellowship of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. At the moment, she is a member of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and of the UN Women Moldova Civil Society Advisory Group.

The Media Forward Policy Brief series is made possible by the generous support of the American and British people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the British Embassy in Chisinau. The contents are the responsibility of Freedom House and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK, USAID or the United States Government.



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

1850 M Street NW,
11th Floor
Washington,
DC 20036

www.freedomhouse.org
[@FreedomHouse](https://www.facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC)
202.296.5101
info@freedomhouse.org