

# Newsletter Promo-LEX

## Transnistrian Region - Media Can Still be Won Over

### In this edition:

Transnistrian Region - 1  
Media Can Still be Won  
Over

Chisinau made every possible mistake in Transnistria, by tolerating or not taking action against the strengthening of a harmful regime with a Soviet mentality, which is maintained only because it manages, through media and propaganda, to dominate the subconscious of the people there. The regime invented virtual enemies and threats, adopted some Soviet slogans (which proved their efficiency in the past) and publicized them, thus keeping 15% of the country's citizens hostages for 22 years. Chisinau lost the media war in Transnistria without firing a slew of a media "bullet". It simply surrendered.

*Vitalie Calugareanu for Promo-LEX*

The Romanian Center for Investigative Journalism and SCOOP (one of the biggest supporters of investigative journalism in the world) organized in Chisinau a meeting with journalists from the Transnistrian region to share info about funding opportunities for investigative projects. No personal invitations were sent out. They just made sure that the ad was properly publicized in the region. Several "press officers" of Transnistrian institutions working for the clandestine regime came to the seminar along with journalists employed by newspapers subordinated to the separatist regime, etc. Asked by the organizers if they deem themselves potential investigative journalists, they admitted they came to the seminar because they were sent there by the bosses.

Other cases of taking on journalists from the left bank in investigation teams funded from abroad had even worse effects. In one case, thanks to a Transnistrian "team member's" connections with certain services working for the illegal regime, we were about to be thrown into a KGB basement in Tiraspol.

### A wide open secret

### Previous issues:

Newsletter 85 click [here](#)  
Newsletter 84 click [here](#)

The shady mandrake bush that is the Transnistrian separatism left no room for grooming even a handful of real journalists. I do not blame them – I am just stating the facts. And I state that in spite of the despicable level of professionalism of Transnistrian journalists, the separatist regime wages a very effectively media war against Moldova. A simple analysis of informational portals via the search engine [www.domainwhitepages.com](http://www.domainwhitepages.com) provides clear evidence of the origin of so-called Transnistrian media attacks against Moldova. Some of the most influential Transnistrian information portals are hosted by two servers located in the Russian Federation, and are managed

almost entirely from a single command center. By the way, a superficial check of information portals in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (using on-line tools available to everyone) points a route to the same virtual command center in Russia. This means that there is a whole team of manipulators in Russia paid to maintain and fuel apocalyptic myths and lies designed to divert any attempts at analytical thinking of the people from the occupied territories.

There is another detail that popped out without any effort during our analysis of Transnistrian online portals. These lies with made up enemies and apocalyptic stories that present the EU as a huge concentration camp are packed in an extremely skillful and treacherous way, leaving the consumer virtually no option but to fall prey to this sort of media manipulation. Another observation is that all these portals have their “English” pages perfectly translated from Russian, to manipulate foreign explorers of the web (search engine users).

### **“You have here untilled soil”**

Chisinau had to do the exact opposite. It had to encourage the media to provide good, fair, fast, and wide information to the inhabitants of the left bank. It should have invited the best specialists in communication and give them the primary task of informing the public in the eastern region and communicating the TRUTH about issues such as: what amount of wealth did Igor Smirnov and Evgheni Sevcuic accumulate? What happened to enterprises and factories in the region? Where do the huge amounts “generously” offered by Russia go? What problems can be solved in Russia with the money Moscow sends to Tiraspol? Why does Dmitry Rogozin like Transnistria so much and what did he do in Moldova during the Moldovan-Russian war? How is sports money stolen in Transnistria? How is humanitarian aid from Russia misappropriated and who are the (Russian and Transnistrian) beneficiaries of so-called “pay-offs” of the aid? As some political operatives would say (in Russian), “you have some untilled soil here.”

80 % of Transnistrian media outlets are officially funded by the separatist administration, reports by international organizations show. For this reason, and because the local media “legislation” is very restrictive, about 60% of cases of human rights violations in Transnistria remain out of reach to anyone.

Such an initiative would be scrapped in Chisinau immediately: “There's no point. It is impossible to obtain such information. Transnistria is too obtuse in terms of access to information.” One could get the impression that Moldova’s leadership for 22 years has been made up of prophets and seers. These “sons” of Baba Vanga are the reason why Chisinau has not created courts for the residents of the Transnistrian region or failed to establish mechanisms for providing social benefits to people from over the river, etc. These legitimate rulers have no idea how the levers of investigative journalism work. It's much easier to bury an initiative and to walk around with ribbon-cutting scissors. Transnistria needs a current of opinion to change the minds of those who say today: “What's the point of telling the truth if nothing changes anyway?”

80 % of Transnistrian media outlets are officially funded by the separatist administration, reports by international organizations show. For this reason, and because the local media “legislation” is very restrictive, about 60% of cases of human rights violations in Transnistria remain out of reach to anyone.

### **The “independent” media and “free” journalists confusion**

One can often find online labels such as “...*independent* journalists from the Transnistrian region say” or “an *independent* newspaper from Transnistria writes...” There are interviews on Youtube with those journalists or editors of ‘independent’ outlets, who refer to the ‘tmr’ as “their country” and talk about imperfections in the ‘tmr’ “constitution” while defying Moldova and its laws just

like those others compared with whom they deem themselves “independent”. There are no independent media in Transnistria! Neither are there absolutely free journalists. There is press controlled and financed by the local administration, which praises the illegal regime, and there are newspapers and journalists who don’t praise the regime just as loud, but who silently tolerate the usurpation and abuse committed by the group in power. Freedom of speech means being allowed to express different points of view. But if the alternative is the silence of those calling themselves “journalists”, we are better off without it, because this alternative gives an outside observer the false illusion that there is “independent press” in the Transnistrian region, which is exactly the argument Sevciuc needs to escape the seal of an illegal dictator.

compared with whom they deem themselves “independent”. There are no independent media in Transnistria! Neither are there absolutely free journalists. There is press controlled and financed by the local administration, which praises the illegal regime, and there are newspapers and journalists who don’t praise the regime just as loud, but who silently tolerate the usurpation and abuse committed by the group in power. Freedom of speech means being allowed to express different points of view.

Another aberration that fascinated fellow journalists from Germany was our habit to call publications of so-called opposition parties from the region “independent”, and those who write party press releases that get published in those newspapers – “independent journalists”. The Germans find it difficult to understand such an approach.

### **Prohibited unwanted websites**

In May 2013, by order of separatist leader Evgheni Sevciuc, access to a number of websites and forums was restricted: [www.rodinapmr.ru](http://www.rodinapmr.ru), [www.tiras.ru](http://www.tiras.ru), [www.dniester.ru](http://www.dniester.ru), [www.forum.pridnestrovie.com](http://www.forum.pridnestrovie.com), [www.forum.dnestra.com](http://www.forum.dnestra.com), [www.openpmr.info](http://www.openpmr.info), [www.pmr-rf.ru](http://www.pmr-rf.ru), [www.forum-pridnestrovie.ru](http://www.forum-pridnestrovie.ru), [www.nistru.net](http://www.nistru.net), and [www.forum-pmr.net](http://www.forum-pmr.net). That even if the criticisms of the Transnistrian administration that appeared on those websites have been at the most shy. Sevciuc ordered all regional information portals to register with the unconstitutional authorities as media outlets so that they could be controlled and sanctioned. “We don’t need anonymous dumps,” Sevciuc was quoted as saying. This happened after he had banned local NGOs from getting funding from abroad. “Tiras” news agency writes that after the unwanted websites were restricted, debates on social networks intensified. Soon after, many “opposition” journalists and politicians from the Transnistrian region reported that their social media and email accounts had been “hacked”. In July 2013, a rally against the closure of the respective websites was held in Tiraspol. The authorized rally only lasted half an hour, drew about 100 people, and mostly opposition politicians from Tiraspol took the floor.

### **Solution: expose, educate, and fund... from a distance**

A solution for Transnistria’s liberation must come from the right bank of Nistru and from Ukraine (should it seek democratization and a European path). But we need a system that works in a concerted way and is easy to understand by ordinary people there. They may not be afraid, but they feel abandoned and lost all hope that their lives can change in any way. We interviewed people in a clothes market in Tiraspol. They were not afraid of the camera. When they learned that I was a foreign journalist (the material was for German ZDF), they left their stalls and gathered around me to share their pain. These people are not completely lost to us. They simply need to be uninhibited (which is the task of the media) and helped to escape poverty (which is the job of the Republic of Moldova).

In a large national project to reunify the country, some tracks may fail. This is what happened, for

instance, with a project funded from abroad that was to end with the launch of six blogs by journalists from the Transnistrian region.

None of these blogs is active at this time. Some online publications have had the same fate. Where did it go wrong? They were physically located on the left bank and, obviously, they were pressured by the regime. But one does not necessarily need to live in Transnistria in order to write about the illegalities in the region. On another note, online media is outside of official control. Another step may be to include Transnistrian journalists in international professional networks for exchange of experience, trainings and scholarships for journalists from the region with international professional organizations. Had we started this and managed to install a constitutional authority 20 years ago, results could be palpable today.

### **Gheorghe Budeanu: Sevciuc worse than Smirnov in oppressing media**

After the 1992 war, journalists from the right bank significantly cut on their travel in Transnistria – some out of fear, others out of boredom. In 2003-2004, journalist Gheorghe Budeanu tried to learn about the region as part of a project called *“Two banks of Nistru: journalists shake hands”*, aimed at bringing closer journalists from both sides. Given the project mission, he was able to learn quite well how journalists from the region work. That is why I decided to ask him some questions.

**Vitalie Calugareanu:** - *Is there now free press or free journalists in Transnistria who can make us believe that normality may be restored in the media over Nistru?*

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - I was an incurable optimist in this regard at the beginning of last decade, as I thought to myself that although Smirnov’s regime controlled almost all the media in the region, there are journalists there who can secure and promote freedom of expression. Other newspapers, radio or television channels that influence public opinion were “mouthpieces” of the local administration or political movements that represented the local administration. The situation did not improve after the arrival of Evgheni Sevciuc who replaced Smirnov. But there are journalists capable of making a free press possible in Transnistria.

*- Why is all Transnistrian media pro-Russian?*

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - It’s very simple: because the region’s official policy is pro-Russian. The people there have been raised in pro-Russian spirit – except for several years during World War II. On the other hand, even if there are journalists who realize that Russia’s policy in the region is hostile and are sympathetic towards Western freedoms and Moldova’s strive to reach them, their instinct of self-defense does not allow them to openly promote their beliefs.

*- From your observations, how much do media consumers from Transnistria want to receive accurate, un-manipulated information?*

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - Well, that’s precisely the root of the matter, to use a colloquial Russian expression. Official propaganda of the separatist regime seeks to turn the population of the region into a mass of *mankurts*, in Aitmatov’s sense, using the most effective soviet manipulation tools. Transnistrian residents largely don’t realize that they are manipulated, and often take truthful information as disinformation. It may sound evil, but that's reality.

*- What risks are there for a journalist should he try to do his job honestly in Transnistria?*

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - A journalist, no matter how honest, has an instinct of self-preservation, like any person, hence the need for self-censorship, which slowly enrolls them with those who are ideological soldiers of the regime or with local “officials”. This symptom is very pronounced in the

region. When one doesn't know what will happen tomorrow or how will they feed their families, when they know that the KGB are alert and always watching, they are forced to adapt to the reality if they want to keep their job. A journalist who does his job well will say truths, and telling political truths in a breakaway region may lead to being declared an enemy, Western agent or advocate for democratic movements from the right bank.

To give you an example to illustrate this, after a meeting with journalists from Dubasari, where we discussed, among other things, professional journalist honesty, a local newspaper editor told me that even the leaves on the trees under which we sat listened in. The next day, the editor was all but sacked... A man was killed in undisclosed circumstances in Camenca – probably in an attempt to warn his wife, editor of the local newspaper, not to allow herself too much “honesty”. Or take the situation of newspaper “Chelovek i ego prava”. Someone threw hand grenades into the news-room venue to plant fear into the paper's chief-editor. I could mention another example, deemed by many as a model in this regard – that of journalist Ernest Vardanean. This case however needs a special comment.

**- How can Transnistrian journalists be “unshackled”, in your opinion? What can Chisinau or the EU do?**

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - I remain convinced that projects such as the one I was involved in 2003-2004: “Two banks of Nistru: journalists shake hands” can help “unlock” the potential of our colleagues from the region. Sure, it's harder to carry out such projects now, but, given the geopolitical situation in the region, nothing goes down easy, and leaving things as they are may lead, in time, to a situation when nothing can be done anymore. One could at least intensify collaboration via a connection such as “Journalists without Borders” to help promote a sense of brotherhood and belonging with our colleagues from the left bank. This in turn will help with the unchaining or promoting freedom of expression...

**- Is online media a solution?**

**Gheorghe Budeanu:** - It's a solution, one good for anyone who fears hardships and problems. As I said, online media is a solution. We know, however that the regime has already taken action against such solutions, blocking even social networks. Online media has less credibility and cannot reach that part of the population has a greater need for accurate information. Nevertheless, all “solutions”, including online media, should be used.

This article was developed within the Project „Institutional Support for Human Rights” implemented by Promo-LEX Association with the support of Civil Rights Defenders from Sida funds. The views expressed in the article reflect the views and position of the author and not necessarily the position of Promo-LEX and Civil Rights Defenders.

All rights protected. The content of the article may be used and reproduced for non-profit purposes and without Promo-LEX's prior agreement by indicating the source of information.

# Promo - LEX

*Advancing democracy and human rights*



**National Endowment  
for Democracy**

*Supporting freedom around the world*

**Edition coordinated by:**

Carolina Bondarciuc

**E-mail:** [crdt@promolex.md](mailto:crdt@promolex.md)

**Web:** [www.promolex.md](http://www.promolex.md)

**Tel/Fax:** (373 22) 45-00-24

**GSM:** 069637849

The **Promo-LEX Association** is a Non-Governmental Organisation focused on promoting democratic values, whose purpose is to advance democracy in the Republic of Moldova, including the Transnistrian region through promoting and defending human rights, monitoring democratic processes and strengthening the civil society.

**Promo-LEX Association provides free legal aid assistance on issues of human rights violations for the inhabitants from the Transnistrian region of Moldova. For consultations please contact: Tel: 022 45-00-24**

**The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily express the views of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).**