

Opinion Paper (Summary)

“Anti-extremism” Measures in the Transnistrian Region of Moldova

Since 2007, purportedly under the guise of “combating extremism”, Transnistrian structures have marginalized dissenting voices, subjected them to degrading treatment, tightened control over the media landscape, significantly restricted the scope for civil society engagement, and promoted military education and potentially violent behaviors among minors.

The Emergence and Persistence of the “Fight Against Extremism”

In the Transnistrian region, the tools and mechanisms employed to “combat extremism” have evolved gradually, drawing inspiration from the practices of the Russian Federation and other established authoritarian regimes. It

commenced with the propagation of alarmist narratives concerning threats to “statehood”, subsequently leading to the implementation of measures that conferred disproportionate authority to Transnistrian security structures.

- The first “law” on combating extremist activities was enacted in 2007, five years after a similar law was passed in the Russian Federation.
 - *This “law” lacks an explicit definition of extremism.*
 - *It offers vague and overly broad definitions for terms such as “extremist activity”, “extremist organization”, and “extremist materials”.*
 - *Clear limitations on anti-extremism measures are absent, particularly when*
- *they evidently interfere with human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, freedom of association, and freedom of expression.*
- *In contrast to international standards, the law’s list of “extremist” offenses includes ten actions that do not refer to the use of violence.*
- Following the adoption of the “law” in 2007, revisions were made to the “criminal code” and “contravention code” to delineate “extremist” offenses and specify the penalties applicable to organizations and individuals involved in “extremist activities”. These purported offenses may encompass actions that are considered lawful and legitimate in a democratic environment, such as engaging in peaceful protests, expressing critical viewpoints on social media platforms, producing satirical content, or exposing illegalities committed by Transnistrian structures.

Expanding the Spectrum of “Anti-Extremist” Measures

Since 2012, alongside the establishment of a “legislative” framework dedicated to “combating

extremism”, the Transnistrian structures have implemented various measures.

- ↳ **In 2012**, a list of organizations and individuals allegedly implicated in terrorist or extremist activities was compiled.
- ↳ **In 2019**, the “fight against extremism” was incorporated into the main directions of the “state counter-terrorism policy” – a document which identifies extremism and the erosion of patriotism among young people as primary domestic sources of “terrorist danger”.



↳ → **In 2020**, the Transnistrian structures escalated efforts to suppress dissenting voices through the adoption of the “strategy for combating extremism for 2020-2026”.

- *This strategy draws from the experiences of “combating extremism” in the Russian Federation, Belarus, and Kazakhstan – states that have distorted the meaning of this concept;*
- *It institutionalizes “countering extremism” as a “state policy” and elevates it among the priority issues;*
- *Particular emphasis is placed on monitoring social and telecommunications networks, with the majority of measures outlined falling within the realm of information policy;*
- *It does not include any explicit provision on how the alignment of “anti-extremism” with international human rights standards will be ensured;*
- *Its adoption coincided with a surge in attacks targeting civic and political activists.*

The objectives of the Transnistrian structures in combating “extremism” are the preservation of their positions of power and the forceful suppression of critical thinking and civic engagement. This observation is further supported by the emphasis placed on safeguarding the “statehood”, interests, and reputation of Transnistrian leaders within the framework of “anti-extremism” measures, rather than prioritizing the safety, rights, and freedoms of the region’s inhabitants. Strategies and “legislative” initiatives devised by Transnistrian leaders sporadically or scarcely address fundamental human rights and freedoms.

↳ → **In 2021**, the “state list of extremist materials” was established.

- *The list comprises eight websites associated with the religious community Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as the Facebook group “Transnistria is our home” and the Viber group “Transnistria”. The former group is*

administered by Ghenadie Ciorba, while the latter is overseen by Boris Babaian, both of whom have been unlawfully convicted for “extremist acts” in the past.

Latest Amendments to “Anti-Extremism Legislation”

In 2023, Anatoli Guretki proposed amendments to the 2007 “law”, granting the “prosecutor general”, his “deputy”, and the “ministry of security” the authority to petition the “courts” for the designation of organizations or their branches as “extremist”. Thus, the powers of Transnistrian security structures have been unjustifiably extended into the realm of freedom of expression and freedom of association.

Another amendment concerns the imposition of penalties for the use of “extremist language”, a measure aimed at aligning the region’s legislation with that of Russia. One potential consequence of this measure could be the persecution of individuals in the Transnistrian region based solely on assumptions or divergent opinions.



Education for “Combating Extremism”

With the implementation of special “legislation” aimed at “combating extremism”, the Transnistrian structures have shown increased interest in educating children and youth in the spirit of “patriotism”. The concept of “patriotic education” has been integrated into the core objectives of both the “state policy in the field of combating extremism” and the “state policy in the field of education”.

Under the guise of “combating extremism”, “patriotic education” has progressively permeated all spheres of education, ranging from classroom lessons in schools and detention centers for minors to webinars for psychologists and military-patriotic camps. Additionally, sports-military competitions and military-themed festivals, often involving minors, including kindergarten children, have become commonplace. These initiatives are primarily orchestrated by Transnistrian security structures, mirroring the Russian model.

The trend towards militarizing school education, purportedly in the interest of “combating extremism”, may result in forming a distorted image of certain historical events, normalizing children and youth’s involvement in potentially violent activities, and shaping groups of individuals obedient and subservient to Transnistrian structures.

Military-Patriotic Camp “Mars”

Each year, approximately 150-200 children and young people from the Transnistrian region, aged between 10 and 18 years old, take part in this camp. Participants are instructed in weapon assembly and disassembly, familiarized with fundamental military service principles, engage in sniper exercises, and attend meetings with war veterans.



*A child participating in the 2019 “Mars” military-patriotic camp, holding an assault rifle.
Source: Transnistrian News*

Directions Set for 2024

According to the annual speech delivered by the leader of the Transnistrian region, “combating extremism” and “patriotic education” of children

and young people will be prioritized by all Transnistrian structures in 2024. The key priorities outlined include:

- 1 instilling the “state ideology” among the younger generation;
- 2 enhancing the level of military and “patriotic” education for minors;
- 3 developing school courses covering topics such as “the legal foundations of the statehood of the pridnestrovian moldovan republic”, “the formation of the Transnistrian people”, and “Transnistria - a democratic and lawful state”;
- 4 intensifying intelligence gathering efforts on military threats, as well as the identification and countering of sabotage, terrorist, and extremist activities.

Recommendations

International organizations, decision-makers in Chisinau, and representatives of diplomatic missions possess various instruments to exert influence on Transnistrian structures, including on the way they implement “anti-extremism

measures”. The following paragraphs outline several recommendations aimed at addressing the climate of impunity and the described phenomenon.

Recommendations for European Union Institutions, Diplomatic Missions in Chisinau, and Other Development Partners:

- *Establish a conditionality mechanism within the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and other bilateral trade agreements benefiting the Transnistrian region. This mechanism should be based on the principles of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic norms in the left bank of the Nistru River and the municipality of Bender. Upholding democratic norms and human rights should be a fundamental requirement for accessing economic and other benefits offered to the Transnistrian region. Without such requirements, the impact of these benefits will remain limited.*
- *Elevate the issue of unlawful convictions, persecution of critical voices, and the detention of journalists and civic activists in inhumane conditions to the top of the agenda in discussions with the political representative of Tiraspol.*
- *Include a list of specific individuals within the Transnistrian structures who are accountable for human rights violations in the Transnistrian region, including the arbitrary use of “anti-extremism” legislation, to the Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/2423.*

Implementing restrictive measures against concrete leaders and representatives of Transnistrian structures will aid in addressing the climate of impunity that has persisted in the Transnistrian region for over 30 years. Some of these individuals, who have engaged in abuses through the use of “anti-extremism mechanisms” in the past two years, are identified in the analysis entitled “Persons Responsible for Human Rights Violations in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova”, published by Promo-LEX in March 2024.

Recommendations to the Government:

- *Consistently refer cases of human rights violations occurring in the Transnistrian region, including those perpetrated under the so-called “anti-extremism legislation”, to relevant international partners involved in addressing the Transnistrian issue.*
- *Advocate for the inclusion of representatives and leaders of Transnistrian structures responsible for serious violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in international lists of sanctions and restrictive measures.*

- *Disseminate information among the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region regarding the procedures available for seeking support and protection, especially in cases of unjust accusations of committing “extremist acts”. This communication should utilize various channels and tools to reach the community effectively. The information provided should specify the relevant institutions to contact, the telephone lines available for assistance, and the support services accessible on the right bank of the Nistru river.*

In recent years, Promo-LEX has identified more than 400 individuals responsible for human rights violations in the Transnistrian region, including cases based on judgments from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). However, none of these identified individuals have been held accountable for their actions. This underscores the critical importance of implementing the recommendation outlined above.



- *Establish and develop support services for victims of human rights violations in the Transnistrian region, including individuals who have been persecuted, intimidated, illegally deprived of their liberty, and subjected to torture under the guise of “extremist acts”.*
- *Formulate a strategy for reforming and demilitarizing school education in the Transnistrian region as an integral component of the country’s reintegration plan. This strategy should align with international standards and best practices observed in post-conflict areas.*

Given the current circumstances, where individuals unlawfully accused of conducting “extremist activities” face persecution, intimidation, systematic surveillance, and endure degrading conditions in detention, it is imperative to address their need for specialized support services. Some individuals targeted by “anti-extremism measures” in the Transnistrian region seek refuge on the right bank of the Nistru river. As citizens and residents of the Republic of Moldova, it is essential to ensure that these victims have equitable access to essential support services as mandated by international standards. We underscore the critical need for facilitating access to information counseling; providing guidance on the risks of secondary victimization, repeated intimidation, or retaliatory actions, and implementing preventive measures; offering psychological support; facilitating labor market mediation; and ensuring access to shelters or suitable temporary accommodations.

Recommendations to Prosecutors and Police:

- *Ensure comprehensive training for prosecution staff on effectively handling cases related to crimes perpetrated by Transnistrian structures, including violations carried out through the arbitrary use of “anti-extremism” measures.*
- *Conduct an evaluation of the handling of criminal cases involving Transnistrian complainants, including victims subjected to abuse by Transnistrian structures under the pretext of “anti-extremism measures”, by criminal prosecution bodies in the municipality of Bender and Dubasari rayon. This assessment aims to gain insights into the factors contributing to the inefficiency of criminal investigations into crimes committed on the left bank of the Nistru River and in the municipality of Bender. By conducting this evaluation, it will be feasible to identify areas requiring additional resources, skills enhancement, and procedural improvements, thereby enabling more effective interventions.*
- *Ensure access to information materials outlining the rights of victims from the Transnistrian region, particularly those subjected to political persecution, within police inspectorates and territorial prosecutor’s offices located in and around the Security Zone.*

This recommendation is grounded in Directive 2012/29/EU, commonly referred to as the “Victims’ Rights Directive”, which mandates that access to information for victims must be ensured at the initial contact with a competent authority.



For a more comprehensive analysis, please refer to the opinion paper entitled “Radiography of the last 17 years of “combating extremism” in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova”. This paper is available in Romanian.

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