

Freedom in the World 2015 - Transnistria

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2015 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

OVERVIEW

International and bilateral negotiations on the status of Transnistria – a breakaway region of Moldova that is also known as the Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika (PMR) – continued during 2014. Tensions increased due to Russia's invasions of neighboring Ukraine as well as Moldova's pursuit of European integration, which Russia and the separatist PMR authorities firmly opposed.

In March and April, PMR lawmakers called on Russian president Vladimir Putin and international bodies to recognize Transnistria's independence as a prelude to Russian annexation. In May, a local pro-Russian organization handed a petition of some 185,000 signatures to Russia's special representative to the region, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Rogozin. When Rogozin's plane was temporarily diverted to Chişinău, Moldovan authorities confiscated some of the signatures, drawing threats of economic repercussions from Moscow.

International negotiations were held under the so-called 5+2 format, with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, and Ukraine mediating between Moldova and the PMR, and the United States and European Union (EU) joining as observers. The talks focused on minor issues related to freedom of movement across the de facto border separating Transnistria from the rest of Moldova and generally failed to address the overarching political questions.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 10 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

Residents of Transnistria cannot choose their leaders democratically, and they are unable to participate freely in Moldovan elections. While the PMR maintains its own legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, no country recognizes its independence. Both the president

and the 43-seat, unicameral Supreme Council are elected to five-year terms. In 2011, the legislature approved constitutional amendments that created a relatively weak post of prime minister and set a two-term limit on the presidency.

The Obnovleniye (Renewal) party maintained its majority in 2010 legislative elections, winning 25 of 43 seats. Party leader Anatoliy Kaminsky was reelected as speaker. While the 2011 presidential election, like all voting for PMR institutions, was not recognized internationally, it featured increased competition and a somewhat broader choice for voters compared with previous polls. Yevgeniy Shevchuk, a former parliament speaker, led the first round with 39 percent, followed by Kaminsky, who had Russia's endorsement, with 26 percent. Founding PMR president Igor Smirnov, whom Moscow had urged not to seek a fifth term, was eliminated in the first round in a field of six. Shevchuk won the runoff against Kaminsky, securing 74 percent of the vote. Kaminsky resigned as parliament speaker and head of Obnovleniye in 2012. He was replaced in both posts by his deputy, Mikhail Burla. In 2013, Tatyana Turanskaya was confirmed as the PMR's new prime minister.

In October 2014, the Supreme Council voted to hold the next local and legislative elections simultaneously in November 2015, instead of March and December, respectively. The move was reportedly designed to conserve resources, though some critics ascribed political or corrupt financial motives to the change.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 5 / 16

Shevchuk, who had fallen out with Smirnov in 2009 and was expelled from Obnovleniye in 2011, formed the Vozrozhdeniye (Revival) movement to back his 2011 presidential bid. Although committed to maintaining strong ties with Russia, he pledged to tackle corruption and laid out plans to reduce barriers to travel and trade with Moldova.

Obnovleniye, the majority party in the legislature, is associated with Transnistria's monopolistic business conglomerate, Sheriff Enterprises, and maintains a close relationship with the ruling party in Russia. The PMR's entire political establishment, including nominal opposition parties, supports the separatist system and Russia's role as patron.

Moscow's political influence in Transnistria is undergirded by more than 1,000 Russian troops, who are ostensibly stationed to guard Soviet-era ammunition depots and uphold a 1992 cease-fire between the PMR and the Moldovan government. During 2014, the Moldovan government reiterated calls for Russia to withdraw its personnel.

Native Romanian speakers are poorly represented in government. While the authorities do not allow voting in Moldovan elections to take place in PMR-controlled territory, residents with Russian citizenship had access to two dozen polling stations for Russia's tightly controlled 2012 presidential election. PMR authorities reportedly blocked voting by resident Ukrainian citizens during the May 2014 Ukrainian presidential election.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

Corruption and organized crime are serious problems. The authorities are entrenched in the territory's economic activities, which rely heavily on smuggling schemes. In 2014, Ukrainian authorities accused Transnistrian smugglers of supplying weapons to pro-Russian separatists in

nearby Odessa. Since 2005, the EU has assisted Ukraine and Moldova to maintain customs controls and seize smuggled goods along what is internationally recognized as their shared border.

Russia has a major stake in the Transnistrian economy and backs the PMR through loans, direct subsidies, and natural gas supplies. The PMR government routinely faces enormous budget deficits. Transnistria has not paid the state-owned Russian energy giant Gazprom for gas imports since 2007, building up a debt of about \$4 billion. Individuals associated with the Smirnov administration have been accused of embezzling Russian aid and Transnistrian public assets.

Civil Liberties: 14 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 5 / 16

The media environment is restrictive. Nearly all media are state owned or controlled and refrain from criticizing the authorities. The few independent print outlets have small circulations. Critical reporting draws harassment by the government, which also uses bureaucratic obstruction and the withholding of information to inhibit independent media. Sheriff Enterprises dominates the private broadcasting, cable television, and internet service markets. Shevchuk issued a decree in August 2014 that required government agencies, private organizations, and citizens to report instances of "extremist" material online.

Religious freedom is limited. Orthodox Christianity is the dominant faith, and authorities have denied registration to several smaller religious groups. Unregistered groups face harassment by police and Orthodox opponents. There are no legal exemptions from military service for conscientious objectors, leading to criminal punishment of Jehovah's Witnesses and others.

Several schools that provide instruction in Romanian using the Latin alphabet, which is associated with support for unity with Moldova, face harassment by PMR officials and are forced to use substandard facilities. Among other forms of pressure in 2014, PMR police in February temporarily detained the director of one of the Latin-script schools and seized money meant for teachers' salaries.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 2 / 12

Authorities severely restrict freedom of assembly and rarely issue required permits for public protests. In 2013, opposition politicians and free speech advocates were allowed to hold a small protest against the blocking of websites by the government, but its impact was limited by other events, such as a military band concert, that were scheduled for the same time and location.

Freedom of association is similarly circumscribed. All nongovernmental activities must be coordinated with local authorities, and noncompliant groups face harassment, including surveillance and visits by security officials. The region's trade unions are holdovers from the Soviet era, and the United Council of Labor Collectives works closely with the government.

F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16

The judiciary is subservient to the executive and generally implements the will of the authorities. Defendants do not receive fair trials, and the legal framework falls short of international standards.

Politically motivated arrests and detentions are common. In 2014, PMR authorities continued to hold a council member and a second man from a disputed border village who had been arrested in 2013 for alleged bribery; the men argued that they were actually detained for resisting the installation of PMR checkpoints near their village.

Human rights groups have received credible accounts of torture in custody, and prison conditions are harsh and unsanitary. A February 2013 UN report found excessive use of pretrial detention, lengthy sentences for minor crimes, and an "alarming" health situation in prisons, including cases of drug-resistant tuberculosis. There is no separate juvenile justice system, and addicts face forced medical treatment. Suspicious deaths of military conscripts occur periodically amid reports of routine mistreatment.

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, authorities discriminate against the Romanian-speaking plurality. Ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians together account for some 60 percent of the population. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people have also reported discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

Travelers are frequently detained and questioned by the PMR authorities, who in some cases seize or demand money and goods. The majority of residents hold Russian, Ukrainian, or other countries' passports besides Moldovan, though many are believed to have multiple citizenship. Thousands reportedly applied for Moldovan passports during 2014 to qualify for Moldova's newly granted visa-free EU travel privileges, and roughly half the population had confirmed their Moldovan citizenship by year's end.

The PMR and Russia complained of increased border restrictions by Ukrainian and Moldovan authorities in 2014, claiming a "blockade" was being imposed, but some official statistics reportedly showed an increase in trade. In April, Moldova reversed excise taxes on raw materials and industrial components imported by Transnistrian enterprises that were introduced in January; the PMR, complaining of double taxation, had demanded that the taxes be lifted before it would proceed with the 5+2 talks. Separately, Ukrainian authorities doubled troop deployments along the Transnistrian section of the border and dug a trench to block both smuggling and potential incursions by Russian military vehicles, though border crossings remained open.

The 2013 UN report found that many residents have lost their rights to housing or agricultural land following flawed privatizations of factories and collective farms. Others living along the cease-fire line between Moldova and Transnistria are hampered by jurisdictional disputes involving their farmland.

Women are typically underrepresented in positions of authority, making up less than 10 percent of the legislature, though Shevchuk's government includes several high-ranking women. Domestic violence against women is a widespread problem, and police sometimes refuse to take complaints from victims. Transnistria is a significant source and transit point for trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received
Y = Best Possible Score
Z = Change from Previous Year

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