



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Miklós Haraszti**

10 March 2005

**Assessment Visit to the Transdnestrian Region of the Republic of
Moldova**

Observations and Recommendations

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti sent his Senior Adviser Alexander Ivanko on an assessment visit to the Transdnestrian Region of the Republic of Moldova on 31 January—2 February 2005. A previous assessment visit personally by the Representative was prepared in October 2004, but was in the last minute deemed “inopportune” by the local authorities, and was cancelled.

This was the Senior Adviser’s third trip to the region over the past five years. The trip was organized by the OSCE Mission to Moldova, and coordinated with the Delegation of Moldova to the OSCE. The purpose of the trip was to assess the current state of media freedom in Transdnestria, and to provide relevant recommendations. The Report was prepared with the assistance of the OSCE Mission to Moldova.

The Senior Adviser met with regional officials, journalists from “state-controlled” and independent media outlets, and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Among those he had talks with, in order of the meetings:

- Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Transdnestria Grigory Maracutsa;
- Deputy Chairman Evgeniy Schevchuk;
- Chairman of the Committee on Science, Culture, Media and Sports Maria Makarova;
- “Deputy Foreign Minister” Vitaliy Yankovskiy;
- Meetings with journalists and editors from “state” media;
- Meetings with journalists and editors from the only private regional broadcaster TSV;
- Meetings with independent journalists in Tiraspol and Ribnitsa.

The General Media Situation in the Region

The situation of the independent media is very difficult, with different methods of pressure applied on those few journalists who do not follow the official line. However, the regional leadership seemed to be open to a dialog with the OSCE which is very much needed for an easing of the constrained environment in which the independent media work. This dialog should continue.

The general media climate in the region can be described as restrictive, although short of open harassment of the few media outlets that proclaim themselves as independent. Only three newspapers are non-governmental, not only organisationally and financially, but also providing political journalism independent of the government line: *Chelovek i Ego Prava* from Tiraspol, *Novaya Gazeta* from Benderi, and *Dobrii Den* in Ribnitsa. All other outlets are either “state-controlled”, or published by local non-government organizations close to the “state”.

Open pressure, including violent tactics, were recently used against the newspaper *Chelovek i Ego Prava* (*The Individual and His Rights*) and its two founders (for more details see the chapter below). Other independent newspapers reported civil libel suits and threatening phone calls from local authorities. In addition, methods of administrative discrimination are often utilized: increased fees for printing services, for renting of facilities, etc. Several editors mentioned that their distributors had been threatened.

Under such circumstances, the majority of journalists, even those working for private media outlets, exercise a level of self-censorship rarely seen in the OSCE region. Several media outlets are privately-owned but are carefully avoiding to openly criticize those in power.

On the positive side, “The Chairman of the Supreme Soviet” did acknowledge “many problems” in the media field. The authorities were also open to the OSCE Media Representative providing legal advice regarding regional media legislation, including on decriminalizing libel.

It is not clear if the constructive verbal exchange of ideas between the Office of the OSCE Representative and the authorities would lead to any positive developments. Nevertheless, since the authorities encouraged further contacts, this dialog should continue.

The Role of the “State” and of the “Ministry of Information and Telecommunications” in Media Development

The “State” in Transnistria has overwhelming control over the majority of the media, either through open ownership or through indirect control. As freedom of the press is incompatible with state ownership in the print press, the international organizations, with the support of Chisinau, should encourage the authorities to privatize at least the three “state”-owned newspapers. The practice of registering newspapers should stop. The control exercised by the “Ministry of Information and Telecommunications” should be replaced by a Moldovan country-wide broadcasting licensing body.

Although the authorities insist that they only own six percent of the regional media, even according to official sources another 45 percent is owned by different “state” agencies, and political and public organizations, all fully controlled by Tiraspol. A leading local independent editor, Grigoriy Volovoi, told this Office that, in his opinion, only 10-15 percent of all publications could be considered non-governmental.

Officials, in conversations, underline the importance of the role of the state in media development claiming that “we can’t really make any fundamental changes until we get independence” (“Supreme Soviet” Chairman Marakutsa).

The massive state property presence is also being justified with the “current political situation” in the former Soviet Union. A paper issued by the “Ministry of Information” (and provided to this Office) described “a newly fashionable pseudo-democratic assault in the post-Soviet region, in the wake of which in reality the legislation in several countries has been handed over to a bunch of bought and politically clueless young people and lumpenproletariat.” Under these circumstances the mentioned Ministry saw the role of the state as providing the population with “truthful” information.

Two additional reasons were given in favour of continuing to have a state press:

- To be able to inform the population about statements and decrees made and signed by the “President”;
- To provide the readers with subsidised and thus affordable newspapers.

The Ministry registers all publications with a circulation over 1,000, and also all broadcasting outlets. This practice allows the Ministry to be subjective with is in violation of international standards that require automatic registration. It even accredits all “foreign” journalists including those coming from Chisinau. Chairman Marakutsa explained the need for accreditation as a “security precaution.”

It seems unlikely that in the nearest future, without an overall political settlement in Moldova, the authorities would agree to abolish the Ministry of Information, and to free

the three main “state” newspapers. Nevertheless, they should be encouraged to do so as well as to be provided with positive examples of similar reforms in the OSCE region.

“State”-Owned Media

With the situation currently being in limbo, at least for the time being “state”-owned media should offer their pages and broadcasting time to different political views that exist in Transnistria.

The authorities own one TV channel (out of two regional ones), one radio station, three newspapers (in Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan), and one news agency. The Senior Adviser met with the editors of TV, radio, the news agency *Olvia-Press*, and two newspapers, *Pridniestrovie* and *Adevarul Nistrean*. All of them had more or less the same views. Also no difference of opinion was noted among the editors during a one hour meeting.

All insisted that their media provide for a variety of opinions, that censorship did not exist, that they were not told what to write or what to broadcast. However, after looking through several issues of different “state” newspapers, and talking to independent journalists, it became clear that this was not the case. As one local observer put it: “the newspapers smear the opposition, condemn any contacts with the right bank [Chisinau], they are very uninformed and slow.”

An editor of a local independent newspaper noted that the “state” media were “forcing us to believe that everybody in Moldova is our enemy.”

The editors in unison repeated on several occasions that they offered space to two prominent local opposition leaders, Alexander Radchenko and Nikolai Buchatskii, but both had declined to be interviewed. Buchatskii disputed that fact saying that, on the contrary, he had asked for air-time but was rebuffed.

A transitory option that could be lobbied with the authorities is to at least provide some space for views that are not necessarily in line with those of the said authorities.

Television of Free Choice (TSV) and the Monopolization of the Telecommunications Market

A local company, Sheriff, which owns TSV, has monopolised not only the private broadcasting sector but the overall local telecommunications market. A plan should be developed to deal with this problem after a political settlement is reached in the region.

The only regional TV channel that is privately owned is *TSV*. It was established just over four years ago by a local company *Sheriff*. It offers news, analytical programs, entertainment, and sports. It started to develop its own talk-shows. The editor of *TSV* Inna Zvyagintseva explained their editorial policy as one of “providing a positive image” to its viewers. She added that *TSV* avoided showing, for example, footage dealing with murders.

She and two of her colleagues, political editor Vadim Bulatovich and anchorman Igor Avrenev, insisted that they objectively covered all political developments, and offered air-time to all prevalent views. Several independent journalists confirmed that *TSV* did provide better news coverage than “state” TV, although they still noted that *TSV* avoided openly criticising the region’s leadership. *TSV* also has the best equipped studio in Moldova.

The owner of TSV, a local entity Sheriff, is currently the monopoly owner of telecommunications services in Transdnistria: telephone, including mobile, Internet access (it is the main provider in the region), and cable television. It is not clear how this company developed, or who are its owners. It is believed to have been established by three former police officers who took part in the 1992 conflict. Over the years, Sheriff has become the largest owner of supermarkets and other businesses in Transdnistria. It built one of the best football stadiums in Europe located in Tiraspol. It is in the process of constructing a luxury hotel and an entertainment centre.

It is clear, that *Sheriff’s* monopoly over telecommunications is unhealthy for market reform, and that a strategy should be developed by international organizations in conjunction with Chisinau on how to solve this issue in the long-term.

Somewhere in the Middle: Profsouznie Vesti (Trade-Union News)

The local trade union weekly, Profsoyuznie Vesti, although nominally independent, is not covering opposition activities. However, it has published articles on corruption and in general does not tow the official line. For the sake of pluralism, the possibility of providing assistance to this newspaper should be explored.

Profsouznie Vesti is published by the local trade union, but it does not provide any financial support to this weekly. Its editor, Ludmila Koval’, told the Senior Adviser that the newspaper did not really have any problems with the authorities outside several civil libel cases filed by local officials. The newspaper focuses on social issues. To avoid being accused of opposition tendencies, *Profsouznie Vesti* always provides space for an official commentary.

“Most, of the time, when somebody does not like our story, they will call and shout at me on the telephone, but not much more. Maybe it is also because only women work here,” said Koval’.

Koval’ said that her newspaper had two main problems: financial limitations, and almost no access to information. “The authorities give information depending on how they feel,” she complained.

Independent Newspapers: Dobrii Den’ in Ribnitsa and Novaya Gazeta in Benderi

International organizations should provide moral, material, financial and technical support to Dobrii Den’ and Novaya Gazeta. They could be supported, for example, with donations of equipment. Dobrii Den’, which is short of journalists, could be provided with a professional journalist-trainer, preferably from Russia or Ukraine, to raise its editorial level and train new staff.

The Senior Adviser visited the offices of *Dobrii Den’* in Ribnitsa in the north of the region. This was his second visit to this newspaper in two years. Previously, the newspaper was sued for libel for 30,000 USD. In the end the newspaper lost the lawsuit but paid a much smaller sum and did not go bankrupt. *Dobrii Den’* extensively covers corruption, especially concerning privatization schemes.

Dobrii Den’ is involved in several joint projects with Moldovan newspapers, mostly dealing with social issues.

The owner of this newspaper, Svetlana Kotovskaya, informed the Office that the newspaper was not really under any serious pressure. “Of course, after you leave, I will be visited by the MGB [“state” security], but that happens so often I don’t even consider it as a form of pressure,” Kotovskaya told Senior Adviser Ivanko.

She considered the lack of access to information a much bigger problem. “We usually don’t get any answers when we ask the authorities for information, they just ignore us,” said Kotovskaya, “In a way that is also a form of pressure since we lose out to other publications, mostly state-controlled.”

She added that recently the newspaper’s distributors were pressured to drop *Dobrii Den’*. This has led to a fall in circulation. Also, publishing costs increased by 20 percent, which forced her to raise the cover price.

In addition, Kotovskaya complained of a severe shortage of professional journalists willing to work in the region. She found it almost impossible to hire young journalists.

This she saw as a major impediment to the future development of her newspaper business.

One idea that could be explored, would be to identify Russian or Ukrainian journalists who would be able to come to Ribnitsa for one-two months and to provide some initial training to interns who should be hired by Kotovskaya. This project could be funded through voluntary contributions.

The Senior Adviser also met with Andrei Safonov and Grigorii Volovoi, who edit *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent newspaper in Benderi. As was the case with *Dobrii Den*, Safonov said that the authorities had stopped using open methods of pressure against his paper, and have become much more subtle in their approach to most independent newspapers. [*For an exception, see the chapter below on Chelovek i Ego Prava.*] However, as Valovoi put it: “the authorities are doing everything to discourage anybody else from becoming an independent journalist or editor.”

“Just today, for example, they forced the local publishing house to raise our printing costs by 70 percent,” said Safonov. Previously, *Novaya Gazeta* has had its print-runs confiscated on a regular basis (*See the Office’s Report on the Media Situation in Moldova from December 2004*). This newspaper also has no access to official information.

Valovoi and Safonov have filed for a broadcasting licence, but have been refused. They plan to appeal. They are also being investigated by the tax inspection.

The Harassment of Alexander Radchenko and Nikolai Buchatskii from Chelovek i Ego Prava

The only human rights newspaper in the region is under constant pressure; a campaign of both physical and psychological intimidation has been organized against the newspaper’s two co-founders, Alexander Radchenko and Nikolai Buchatskii. The authorities should cease this campaign immediately. International donors should look for a possibility to fund this newspaper.

Buchatskii provided extensive details to the Office concerning the campaign against him and Radchenko. Several local newspapers close to the region’s leadership ran smear campaigns against these journalists. For example, the local newspaper *Novii Dnestrovskii Kurier* (told by several interlocutors to be associated with MGB, the local security service) accused Buchatskii of being a “Satanist” and of involving his underage granddaughter in “satanic activities.” *Novii Dnestrovskii Kurier* has been conducting a smear campaign of both editors. It even editorialised that to criticize Transnistria because of wide-spread corruption was “intolerable”.

Olvia Press, the official Transdniestrian agency, published a number of articles accusing Radchenko of treason, in particular of collaborating with Chisinau and various western countries. Buchatskii was described to Ivanko by the editor of “State” radio as a “drunk and a traitor.”

The Office’s Senior Adviser visited the office of *Chelovek i Ego Prava* and saw that the building where they were renting space, and only that building in the neighbourhood, had been defaced with obscene graffiti, and most of its windows had been broken. Buchatskii and Radchenko were physically attacked on several occasions. The office is located next to the headquarters of the local leadership, and this area is heavily patrolled by security forces, none of which took any action to prevent assaults against persons and property of the paper.

Background Information on This Case

Several Transdniestrian “patriotic” organizations during the week of 13-17 December 2004 launched a campaign of defamation and physical attacks against Aleksander Radchenko, the sole opposition deputy in the Transdniestrian Supreme Soviet. The action came on the eve of a government-inspired recall vote on 19 December, aimed at removing the sole independent voice from the left bank legislature.

Aleksandr Radchenko, a former Soviet army officer and government publicist in the early days of the Transdniestrian regime, was elected to the “Supreme Soviet” in December 2000 from a Tiraspol district as the leader of the opposition Party of Peoples’ Power. Radchenko and Buchatskii also regularly publish critical commentary on the situation in Transdnistria in Chisinau newspapers.

For a long time authorities in Tiraspol tolerated Radchenko’s opposition activities. However, with the marked deterioration of relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol during 2004, Transdniestrian security forces clearly began to move against Radchenko.

After a failed gathering of left and right bank human rights NGOs in Tiraspol in early July, unknown persons scrawled crude obscenities and poured acid on the entrances to Radchenko’s and Buchatskii’s residences. By late summer, Transdniestrian authorities collected some 200 signatures from voters in Radchenko’s district calling for his recall as a “Supreme Soviet” Deputy. Radchenko challenged both the validity of the action and the signatures in Transdniestrian courts, but lost on all counts. The recall election was scheduled for 19 December, with five polling places in his Tiraspol district. For Radchenko to be removed, opponents needed to obtain one more than the 1325 votes he received in 2000. The necessary quorum of 25 percent of eligible voters was not reached. Less than 10 percent of voters in his electoral district participated, and, as a result, the recall failed.

On 16 December activists from two officially sponsored Transdniestrian “NGOs” – the League of Transdniestrian Youth and “Tiraspolchanka,” a patriotic organization of

women pensioners – picketed Radchenko’s newspaper office in Tiraspol. The demonstrators burned Moldovan flags and portraits of Radchenko and Voronin. When Radchenko arrived at his office, demonstrators pelted him with water, plastic bottles, and debris. Radchenko suffered slight bruises. A lengthy, laudatory account of the events, with several pictures, appeared immediately on the Olvia-Press website.

At the same time, activists distributed and posted derogatory leaflets in the building in which Radchenko resides. “Attention – Danger,” the leaflet read, “In apartment 129 in our building lives a maniac!” The flyer accused Radchenko of writing obscenities on the walls himself, and warned residents to protect their children. “Think how to isolate this monster in human form,” the leaflet concludes. “Say NO to the maniac. Say YES to a peaceful and happy life.”

Recommendations

- ***The situation of the independent media is very difficult, with different methods of pressure applied on those few journalists who do not follow the official line. However, the regional leadership seemed to be open to a dialog with the OSCE which is very much needed for easing the constrained environment in which the independent media work. This dialog should continue.***
- ***The “State” in Transdnistria has overwhelming control over the majority of the media, either through open ownership, or through indirect control. As freedom of the press is incompatible with state ownership in the print press, the international organizations, with the support of Chisinau, should encourage the authorities to privatize at least the three “state”-owned newspapers. The practice of registering newspapers should stop. The control exercised by the “Ministry of Information and Telecommunications” should be replaced by a Moldovan country-wide broadcasting licensing body.***
- ***With the situation currently in limbo, at least for the time being “state”-owned media should offer their pages and broadcasting time to different political views that exist in Transdnistria.***
- ***A local company, Sheriff, which owns TSV, has monopolised not only the private broadcasting sector, but also the overall local telecommunications market. A plan should be developed to deal with this problem after a political settlement is reached in the region.***
- ***The local trade union weekly, Profsoyzie Vesti, although nominally independent, is not covering opposition activities. However, it has published articles on corruption, and in general does not follow the official line. For the sake of pluralism, the possibility of providing assistance to this newspaper should be explored.***

- *International organizations should provide moral, material, financial, and technical support to Dobrii Den' and Novaya Gazeta. They could, for example, be supported with donations of equipment. Dobrii Den', which is short of journalists, could be provided with a professional journalist-trainer, preferably from Russia or Ukraine, to raise its editorial level and train new staff.*
- *The only human rights newspaper in the region is under constant pressure; a campaign of both physical and psychological intimidation has been organized against the newspaper's two co-founders, Alexander Radchenko and Nikolai Buchatskii. The authorities should cease this campaign immediately. International donors should look for a possibility to fund this newspaper.*