

Transnistria's presidential election: A hard-fought contest with no punches pulled, as Russia diverts its attention from the unrecognised state

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Electoral contests in unrecognised states are often complex affairs. The presidential election which took place on 11 December in Transnistria, the self-declared Republic which broke away from Moldova in 1992, was no exception. [Alexandru Leşanu](#) details the bitter fight between the outgoing president, Evgeny Shevchuk, and the former parliament speaker, Vadim Krasnoselsky, who emerged victorious.



With 62.3 per cent of the vote, Vadim Krasnoselsky, the speaker of the Transnistrian [Supreme Council](#) (the local parliament), secured a comfortable [victory](#) in the Transnistrian presidential elections on 11 December. The defeated president, Evgeny Shevchuk, was able to accumulate only 27.4 per cent of the votes.

This was a far cry from the 73.9 per cent Shevchuk had won when he [came to power](#) in 2011, defeating Igor Smirnov, the first president of Transnistria (officially known as the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic), who had been in power continuously for 20 years. Shevchuk lost popular support in almost the same fashion as Smirnov. Now the main question is whether the newly elected president will be able to avoid the fate of his predecessors.

Another curious and so far neglected outcome of the presidential election is that two candidates who have their roots in the judiciary received the lowest number of votes. Aleksandr Deli, the Prosecutor General, was the worst-performing of the six candidates who took part in the election, receiving just over 0.5 per cent, while Vladimir Grigorev, the former head of the Constitutional Court, received around 0.7 per cent. The fact that these two officials accumulated the lowest levels of support shows the current attitude of voters toward the local justice system.

A bitter electoral campaign

The presidential campaign started in December 2015, following elections for the Supreme Council, and thus has to be seen within the context of the Supreme Council results. In that electoral contest, the Obnovlenie party, which was opposed to Shevchuk, secured 33 seats out of the 43 available.

After the inauguration of the new Supreme Council, the speaker and his deputies started a highly active campaign against Shevchuk, accusing him of embezzling state money. In turn, Shevchuk promoted a law mandating that Sheriff – a major company with extensive business interests in trade, communications and industry, which is said to have [links with Obnovlenie](#) – had to provide \$250m as compensation for the numerous tax privileges that it had gained from the establishment of the PMR.

The two main candidates then engaged in a hard-fought campaign, accusing each other of stealing state funds. On the one hand, the state TV channel *Pervyj Pridnestrovskij* presented Krasnoselsky – who claims to be independent – as Sheriff's candidate. The public media sought to [shape](#) the image of Shevchuk as a defender of the state, while Krasnoselsky was portrayed as a marionette figure of Transnistria's largest commercial enterprise.

On the other hand, TSV, the private TV channel associated with Sheriff, widely distributed information about the alleged schemes through which Shevchuk was claimed to have enriched himself and established a regime of governance based on personal loyalty. The peak of the campaign occurred in October, during the only televised debate between the two main candidates. Then, Krasnoselsky articulated a short [monologue](#) accusing Shevchuk and his government of dubious schemes, before leaving the studio:

Your suggestion to have a private conversation between us loses any sense, until you, Mr President, do not reveal the activities of your business ventures. Until you do not return back to the state coffers all the gas money stolen through off-shore companies. Until you do not make the names of all those who are guilty. (...) A thief should be in prison.



Russia is a recurrent theme in the Transnistrian elections. Although Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, [declared](#) that Moscow would not support any candidate, Russia was nevertheless a central subject of the campaign. All the candidates pledged allegiance to the idea that Transnistria had to gain international recognition with the subsequent aim of joining the Russian Federation. Candidates competed to show who is more loyal to Russia and accused each other of behind the scenes dealings with Moldova and Ukraine.

Both Shevchuk and Krasnoselsky sought to present themselves as influential in Moscow. They sought to create links with MPs in the Russian Duma to support their candidacy. At times in inadvertently comic ways, TV stations would interview obscure people in Moscow, presenting them as official spokespeople for the Russian point of view, even though Russian high officials tried to stay clear of expressing their support for any of the candidates.

The competition between the two TV channels continued on the day of the elections. Two companies [were employed](#) to conduct exit polls. On the one hand, The Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, contracted by the TSV, announced Krasnoselsky's victory immediately after the closing of the polls. The agency contracted by Shevchuk's team did not announce the results at all.

What the future holds for Transnistria

Shevchuk's presidency coincided with the war in Eastern Ukraine and the emergence of other de facto states in the post-Soviet space. Alongside the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the [Donetsk People's Republic](#) in Eastern Ukraine, Transnistria – with its less than five hundred thousand inhabitants – now has to compete for Russia's attention and assistance on less favourable grounds. Before 2014, Transnistria was Russia's gateway to the Balkans and the means of keeping Moldova out of NATO and the EU. But [with Igor Dodon's victory](#) in the recent Moldovan presidential elections and the failure of the pro-European coalition in Chisinau, Russia has come to the realisation that the Moldovan government is now the best advocate for Russian interests in the region. So, Russia has diverted its attention away from Transnistria.

Still, Russia plays a major role as the most important donor for the Transnistrian budget. In his victory speech, [Krasnoselsky promised](#) to integrate Transnistria into the Eurasian Economic Union. Considering the fact that currently Transnistria exports most of its goods to the EU, and the lack of a common border with Russia, Krasnoselsky's promise looks similar to the pledge of the current Moldovan government to integrate Moldova into the EU. As a major donor, Russia will have a major say in the economic future of Transnistria, but Transnistria will still export more of its goods to the EU.

After the Transnistrian elections, Dodon proposed to meet with Krasnoselsky at the beginning of the next year in Tiraspol. [According to him](#), the two new presidents will be able to open a new chapter in the Moldovan-Transnistrian relationship. In turn, Krasnoselsky continued to stick to the language of his predecessors by declaring that he is ready to discuss any issue apart from the political status of Transnistria inside Moldova. He pointed to the need to develop good relations with Moldova and Ukraine as "[good neighbours](#)".

Dodon was not the first Moldovan president to define the Transnistrian issue as a priority. In 2001, the newly elected Moldovan president, Vladimir Voronin, who was born in Transnistria, promised a prompt resolution to the conflict. After several enthusiastic declarations and the failed [Kozak Memorandum](#), Voronin changed his tune, and ended up by being the first Moldovan president to declare European integration as his top priority. One cannot exclude the same scenario for the currently pro-Russian Dodon.

Despite their harsh rhetoric against each other, both Shevchuk and Krasnoselsky [held jobs](#) in companies affiliated with Sheriff. Shevchuk was the deputy director of Sheriff from 1998 to 2000, while Krasnoselsky was employed by the only mobile phone operator which is affiliated with the holding. With a constitutional majority in parliament and a president from the same political party, the Transnistrian authorities can now promote all kinds of political and economic changes. The

main question is whether Sheriff will be willing to cede some of its economic power while holding on to full political power. The experience of the post-Soviet space has shown that politics has become the main business, and many business people get involved in politics because they want to preserve their economic assets.

From this perspective, Sheriff has secured its economic interests. On the other hand, Krasnoselsky promised in his victory speech to promote small and medium enterprises. If he respects his promises, then he will have to adopt a series of reforms to limit the monopoly Sheriff currently enjoys. It remains to be seen whether he will be strong enough to confront his electoral sponsor during his tenure as a president. If he refuses to limit the economic power of Sheriff, then he might suffer the same fate as Shevchuk at the next presidential elections.

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Featured image: Coat of arms of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria) as an advertisement in Tiraspol. Credits: [TheFlyingDutchman](#) (CY BY 3.0)*

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