

# BREAKING INTO A BREAKAWAY REPUBLIC

TEXT: JOEL ALAS PHOTOS: MARCELL NIMFÜHR AND KRAMAR



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OUR FRIEND MAX IS MC IN THE CLUB PLAZMA. OUTSIDE THERE MIGHT BE A LENIN STATUE, BUT INSIDE THEY ENJOY RAVES ON A FERRY ON THE RIVER DNIESTR, HAVE DRINKING GAMES, SPEND A DAYS WAGE ON AN IMPORTED RED BULL.



Off the maps and out of the guidebooks, the tiny non-nation of Pridnestrovie duels with Belarus for the title of Eastern Europe's most intriguing destination. The breakaway state, sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine, has increasingly come to the attention of off-track adventure travelers in their quest to find more obscure and unspoilt locations.

Pridnestrovie (also known as Transnistria) exudes the pheromonal spunk of an emerging post-Communist state, replete with despotism, bribery and a developing nightlife. The president is Igor Smirnov – what more can you ask for than a leader whose last name is homonymous with a vodka brand (and who looks like an overweight copy of Lenin, with his Bolshevik goatee)? Having realized its bewitching appeal to a certain traveller demographic, Pridnestrovie has attempted to capitalize on tourism by setting up a website that proclaims itself “the Ukrainian Riviera”.

Six years ago a pair of Austrian photojournalists began visiting Pridnestrovie, building up connections and trust with local citizens and authorities over a series of subsequent trips. The culmination of their work is the photobook “This is Radio PMR: News from Transnistria”, released in 2007 by boutique German publishing house Bildschöne Bücher. B EAST spoke to Marcell about their travels through this curious little country.

**WHAT IS THE NIGHTLIFE LIKE? DOES IT EXIST?**

Marcell: Pridnestrovie is a journalist's and an artist's dream. This is a country that refuses the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even though it no longer is Communist, it still holds high the values of the glorious past. The country is internationally not recognized - that adds a thrilling political momentum. The people still live under Soviet-style propaganda which is an invitation for artistic reflection and action. Last but not least, there are few westerners who expose themselves to Pridnestrovie. We believe there are not many Western Europeans who know the country as well as we do.

**WHAT'S NEXT - WHAT BORDERS HAVEN'T BEEN CROSSED?**

We have travelled Pridnestrovie for six years now. It became sort of a second home. I think we are not ready to let go completely. There are still so many stories to tell. The book was not the end but rather a beginning. Besides that we are ogling the other non-recognized countries - South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Karabakh, Somaliland. Borders and boundaries are what interest us most.

**WAS PRIDNESTROVIE A CLOSED SOCIETY? WERE PEOPLE UNWILLING TO TALK TO YOU AT FIRST? HOW DID YOU WIN THEIR CONFIDENCE?**

Pridnestrovie is both a closed society and one

with a certain amount of curiosity. There is isolation from the outside world. People can travel to some extent but they feel left alone. Due to the small number of visiting foreigners we are as visible as a coloured cow. There was this young woman who was so thrilled to meet us, saying that she never expected to be able to talk to a foreigner. But there is a lot of suspicion thanks to the propaganda. So the first thought of a Pridnestrovian might be – “Cool, there is a foreigner to talk to.” And the second - but what if he is a spy? It took quite some time to make friends, to have open and honest conversations. There was actually one thing we did to win their confidence - we gave the people the feeling that we were not there to judge their country but to understand it.

**WHAT IS THE NIGHTLIFE LIKE? DOES IT EXIST?**

The capital city Tiraspol has a small but fine nightlife. Our friend Max is MC in the club Plazma. Outside there might be a Lenin statue, but inside they enjoy raves on a ferry on the river Dniestr, have drinking games, spend a days wage on an imported Red Bull, dress up in last year's fashion from Kiev or Moscow. A trainer of a foreign soccer club raved glowingly about how the women of a nightclub treated his team and staff. There is one main boulevard in Tiraspol. At night-time you cruise up and down the street, have pineapple juice and a pizza at Seven Days and then head to the clubs or the local casino. Fortunately the times of curfews are over.

**WHAT ABOUT OTHER FORMS OF NEW CULTURE. DO YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE MUSIC, FASHION, ART, LOVE?**

Pridnestrovie is today what other CIS countries were in the beginning of the '90s. A painter told us - “We don't like modern paintings. It wasn't long ago when our people put carpets on the wall instead of pictures.” We met a young actor who desperately wants to stage avant-garde plays but is not accepted. Too far ahead for his time. Transformation has not yet arrived there. What they do is make music. Pridnestrovians love rock, especially if it sounds like Rammstein. They have punk concerts where the audience sits on chairs well-behaved. There is an annual festival in the city stadium for aspiring Russian rock bands. There is one hip-hop band so far. Even though there is no official discrimination against gay people there is no open scene yet.



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DID YOU FORM AN OPINION ABOUT THE WAY FORWARD FOR PRIDNESTROVIE? SHOULD IT BE INDEPENDENT, SHOULD IT JOIN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (AS IT WANTS TO) OR SHOULD IT BE GIVEN BACK TO MOLDOVA?

Pridnestrovie faces a grim future. No political model will guarantee freedom and prosperity. And no solution, be it independence, joining Russia or be annexed by Moldova, seems possible or feasible at this time. Maybe the country would prosper if joining Russia was possible. It just is not very likely to happen. But we believe that the people should have the right and the possibility to decide what they want. A referendum that is internationally accepted. Pridnestrovie has a reality that everybody younger than 25 has no memory of being part of Moldova. It appears that Pridnestrovie is a plaything for Moldova. We don't believe that there will be any integration.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR BOOK WILL ACHIEVE? A BETTER OUTCOME FOR PRIDNESTROVIE? MORE TOURISM?

Humbly do we decline the hope that our book will turn history around. What we do want to achieve is to put Pridnestrovie on the map in international media. We would be happy to interest people in this country and in this conflict. There is little news space for Pridnestrovie and most coverage is uniformly against the country. We want to balance this with our reality. We want to set a position against the biased coverage of Western media. We especially want to show that behind the cold news there are faces and emotions. We definitely would encourage tourism! People, go to Pridnestrovie as long as it exists. It's an adventure, it's a trip back to the past, it offers a way of understanding. Also an understanding of why many Russians still cherish the Soviet Union.

This is Radio PMR: News from Transnistria - Available from Bildschöne Bücher

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