

# Interview with Alexandru Burian

## MOLDOVA IS A MULTIFACETED STATE IN TERMS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

ALEXANDRU BURIAN

Doctor of law, professor in the Department of International Law and External Economic Relations Law of Moldova State University, and pro-rector of the University of European Studies of Moldova. He is the author of more than 250 pieces of scholarly writing, including 6 monographs and 12 university textbooks in the fields of public international law, diplomatic and consular law, geopolitics, diplomatic protocol, and etiquette.

In 1988–1990, he was a Senior Scientific Assistant in the International Department of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and Senior Researcher in the International Relations Department, Institute of Marxism – Leninism of the CPSU CC (Moscow). In 1990–1994, he was a Member of Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. In 1993–1994, he was the Chairman of the Commission for International Relations, and the head of the Moldovan parliamentary delegation to PACE.

In 1994–1995, he was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova. Burian was the head of Moldovan government delegations in negotiations with Iran, Cuba, China, Romania, Russia, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Malta.

In 1995–1997, he was the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Moldova to the Federal Republic of Germany, the Kingdom of Spain, and the Kingdom of Denmark. In 2002–2003, Burian was the Head of the Protocol Sector of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. In 2005–2009, he was the Director of the Institute of History, State and Law at the Academy of Sciences of Moldova.

**After the collapse of the USSR, relations with national minorities in many post-Soviet republics became strained. Moldova managed to resolve the issue with the Gagauz people peacefully, while the situation in Transnistria erupted into conflict. You participated directly in these political processes. How can you explain this situation? What miscalculations were made by the Moldovan leadership in the 1990s?<sup>1</sup>**

– The 1990s is a period that we still do not completely understand. From 1990 to 1994, I was a member of the Moldovan Parliament, so I observed many things and processes from within. Moldova is a multifaceted state in terms of national identity. It has been like that for centuries.

Moldova as a state emerged in the fourteenth century at the crossroads of different cultures and civilizations. As it had very strong neighbours – Poland, Turkey, and later Russia – Moldova constantly had to manoeuvre. This influenced the choice of state religion. Ultimately, Orthodox Christianity was chosen. The Cyrillic alphabet was borrowed from the Bulgarians. This policy of manoeuvring enabled Moldova to retain its sovereignty for a long time. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Moldova had the bad luck of being divided into three parts.

In 1775, following the Austro-Turkish War, northern Bukovina, which is part of historical Moldova, was incorporated into the Austrian Empire. In 1812, after a series of Russo-Turkish wars, the eastern part of Moldova was incorporated by Russia. The territory between the Carpathian Mountains and the Prut River remained part of Turkey. In 1859, as part of the Ottoman Empire, this territory was united with Wallachia to form Romania, which became an independent state in 1877.

Moldova was unable to implement its modernist statehood project because of these partitions. However, the emergence of Romania facilitated the evolution of a literary Romanian language which became the language of science, culture, politics, and economics. Previously, Moldovan was spoken only at home and was the language of the common people. The emergence of literary Romanian contributed to the growth of the Moldovan national identity.

For example, in the Russian Empire, the Moldovan language was not taught in school. My father, who was born in 1902, completed five grades under the tsar, and he was taught in Russian. There were no Moldovan schools in Bravicea at the time.

The fact that the modern territory of Moldova was for a long time a part of different states contributed to the multi-ethnic character of the region. In addition to the Moldovans, in the nineteenth century a large

<sup>1</sup> The interview was recorded on 11 May 2022. The editors of AREI do not necessarily share the interviewee's views or opinions.

group of the Gagauz, a Turkic people who are Eastern Orthodox Christians, settled on this territory. The Russian Empire extended its patronage over them. The same goes for the Bulgarians who settled in the south of Bessarabia.<sup>2</sup> In fact, both the Gagauz and the Bulgarians still live in Moldova and in the south of the Odessa region in Ukraine.

This is a brief history – a context, so to speak. But let's go back to the 1990s. In the process of *perestroika*, the language issue became more acute in Moldova. In 1989, a law was passed on the official status of the Moldovan language as the state language, written in the Latin script instead of the Cyrillic alphabet. This was only logical. After all, Moldovan belongs to the Romance group of languages, and its semantics are easier to convey in the Latin script.

At that time, the Moldovan independence movement was born. However, it was very cautious and limited in scope, as people were afraid of Moscow. It was Russia that had the upper hand in this regard. It was the first to declare its state sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> We – Ukraine and Moldova – simply followed the lead. We have to be grateful to the Russian political elite, which took this radical step. They were, to some extent, the drivers of this process, and that has to be acknowledged.

Parallel to the Moldovan independence movement, a movement for unification with Romania began, which was a rather radical step. None of the 15 former Soviet republics had the sort of plans that Moldova had. In Ukraine, for example, there were no intentions to unite with Poland. It was out of the question.

#### **What was the reason behind Moldova's desire to unite with Romania?**

– In fact, very few people – less than 10% of the country's population – were in favour of unification with Romania in the past, and the same is true now. There was no reason as such for this. It existed only at the level of an idea. Democracy allowed every group to put forward its vision – to express its opinion. On the other hand, the supporters of unification with Romania have been very active.

In Romania there is indeed a desire to unite at the level of public sentiment, but there is no state strategy for that. It's not that simple. In 30 years, Moldova's pro-Romanian political circles have never managed to get more than 10% support in parliament.

<sup>2</sup> From the fourteenth century, the Gagauz people lived in the Despotate of Dobruja (aka the Principality of Karvuna), which later became part of the Ottoman Empire. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Russo-Turkish wars led to anarchy in this region. It was then that the Gagauz and some Bulgarians took advantage of the Russian Empire's invitation to resettle in Bessarabia.

<sup>3</sup> The Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was adopted on 12 June 1990.

**Did you say there is such a desire in Romania?**

– There is. Some politicians talk about unification. However, the only Romanian president who stated that publicly was Traian Băsescu.<sup>4</sup> Other presidents, starting with Ion Iliescu<sup>5</sup> (with whom I personally discussed the subject), preferred to refrain from making public statements of that kind. They were aware that this would require a referendum, the results of which would be disappointing. Even if there had been an option to unify the countries based on a decision of the parliaments of Romania and Moldova, there would not have been enough votes in the Moldovan Parliament to support it.

Such an attempt was made in 1992. The entire Romanian Parliament came to Chişinău. I remember that joint meeting. They realized as soon as they arrived that this was a lost cause. Against the backdrop of these events, the Gagauz and Transnistria raised the issue of seceding from Moldova. I want to note that this idea of Transnistria's secession from Moldova was also supported by some circles in Ukraine. This has to do with our common history. The fact is that Transnistria in the interwar period was part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).<sup>6</sup> The population of Transnistria is very mixed, as, indeed, is the population of Moldova. In the early 1990s, the ethnic composition of Transnistria was as follows: Ukrainians, 28%; Russians, 25%; and Moldovans, 40%.

Obviously, the Ukrainian population in Transnistria had a say and, to a certain extent, was able to choreograph this process. At that time, Ukrainians in Transnistria joined efforts with Russians, and that's how it all turned out.

The 1992 war was provoked. In its essence, it was utterly stupid, just like any war.

**Can you please tell me if this war was provoked by external actors, such as Russia, or if it was instigated by internal Moldovan and Transnistrian circles?**

– We had the feeling that local political elites sought escalation, but we have no corroborative evidence.

In any case, I can say this based on the findings of our parliamentary commission. We managed to establish that someone called the Moldovan

<sup>4</sup> Traian Băsescu (b. 1951) is a Romanian politician; he was president of Romania from 2004 to 2014. He is a supporter of the idea of a 'Greater Romania'. In 2005, he put forward a plan to unite Romania and Moldova. However, this plan was not supported by the Moldovan leadership.

<sup>5</sup> Ion Iliescu (b. 1930) is a Romanian politician; he was president of Romania from 1990 to 1996 and from 2000 to 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was part of the Ukrainian SSR from 12 October 1924 to 2 August 1940. The Moldavian ASSR included the left-bank part of modern Moldova, i.e., present-day Transnistria. In 1940, after the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union, the Moldavian ASSR, except for some areas, became part of the established Moldavian SSR.

president's office on the morning of 2 March 1992, and said that civilians were being fired at from the Transnistrian side across the Dniester River. The president's office was not able to make sense of this and immediately summoned the police, as we didn't have an army at the time.

At the same time, someone called the Transnistrian leadership and said that shots were being fired from the Moldovan side across the Dniester River. The Transnistrian leadership, in turn, sent their police. Then it went from bad to worse; the police from both sides arrived at the location, waiting in ambush; someone fired a gunshot in the air, and the process went off the rails. And then the situation escalated. The irrational commander of the 14th Army, General Lebed,<sup>7</sup> gave an order (without any approval from Moscow, by the way) for the army to take up firing positions. This war claimed 300 lives on both sides.

**How realistic is this figure? There are reports of 1,000 deaths.**

– No, the Transnistrian authorities are exaggerating so that they can create a pantheon of heroes. There were no firefights as such – only shots fired across the Dniester River.

There was a clash in Varnița when two buses carrying Moldovan policemen came under fire. During that incident, 90 people were killed. As a result, Moldovan police stormed into Bender, and shooting started. Apparently, they fired at the balconies of residential buildings. Those victims and those who died in Bender are actually the 300 people who fell victim to this conflict.

The situation with Gagauzia was completely different. They tried to declare independence, but we managed to come to an agreement with them in 1994. A parliamentary commission was set up. By the way, I was a member of it, and I participated in meetings with the Gagauz. Moldova provided the Gagauz with national and cultural autonomy. Politically, Gagauzia is not an independent entity recognized at the international level, but it has all the attributes of a state: a constitution, a flag, and an anthem. I believe Transnistria could also receive these attributes, but the local elites have inflated political ambitions. Unfortunately, I have no corroborative evidence, but there is reason to believe that all the Moldovan authorities are in some way involved in the corruption schemes and fraudulent actions of the Transnistrian leadership. This is also one of the factors preventing this conflict from being resolved, as it benefits both sides, and there is

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Lebed (1950–2002) was a lieutenant general and a Soviet and Russian military and political figure. On 27 June 1992, by order of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, Lebed was appointed commander of the 14th Guards Army stationed in Transnistria. On 8 July 1992, he launched artillery strikes at the Moldovan side and put Russian tanks in combat positions. None of these manoeuvres were formally approved by Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and were against his orders.

some indirect evidence that speaks in favour of this interpretation. Transnistria is a grey economic zone.

**Can you give an example?**

– There is no conflict as such between Transnistria and Moldova. There is a conflict between political elites, whereas the ethnic compositions of Transnistria and Moldova are the same: 40% and 67% Moldovans, 28% and 13% Ukrainians, and 25% and 6% Russians, respectively. This is, let's say, taking into account the migration processes of the last 30 years, which have led to a decrease in the percentage of Russians and Ukrainians in Moldova.

Also, there are a lot of mixed marriages for whose children it is quite problematic to determine national identity. My brother, for example, was married to a woman from Dubăsari, Transnistria. From this point of view, it can be argued that there is no ground for interethnic hostility.

The population of Transnistria has significantly decreased over the last 30 years. At the moment, 300,000–350,000 people live there, about 200,000 of whom have Moldovan citizenship in addition to Transnistrian, as well as Russian IDs, and 70,000–80,000 have Ukrainian citizenship. I am more than certain that many Transnistrian residents have three IDs at the same time.

It is clear that the political leadership in Transnistria would not want to swap their presidential and ministerial positions for those of district leaders. A large proportion of the population is involved in state structures that would be dissolved in the case of unification with Moldova. We are talking about customs, border guards, the army, etc. All these people are afraid of losing their jobs.

In fact, there is no border between Moldova and Transnistria, i.e., there are border guards on the Transnistria side but not on the Moldovan side. I have travelled there several times by car.

Regarding instances of corruption, the Transnistrians have, for example, introduced their own number plates, which are not recognized by the international community. Unfortunately, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia used to allow entry onto their territory with these number plates. Now Ukraine has banned them. Moldova also allows vehicles with these plates to enter, but it is impossible to enter EU territory – for example, Romania – with them. Transnistria has started demanding recognition of its number plates through the OSCE, but so far without success. They recognize Moldovan plates.

They have no telephone service because the International Telecommunication Union has refused to give them an international code. The population uses Moldovan telephone numbers.

At its widest, the width of Transnistria is 13–16 km, with an average width of 10 km. Of course, the Moldavian mobile network covers the territory of Transnistria.

It is absolutely unclear to me why Moldova met them halfway when it comes to number plates and communications.

In the 2000s, Transnistria was allowed to sell products to the EU through Moldova. They register their companies as Moldovan and export products to the EU and Ukraine, but these business entities do not pay taxes. Moreover, they are not subjected to customs control, which creates favourable conditions for smuggling. This is absolute nonsense, and it goes on with the permission of the Moldovan authorities. A legitimate question arises as to why Moldova is playing up to the Transnistrian leadership.

I hope that all these issues will be resolved when a serious debate starts. Right now, people in Transnistria are scared by the war in Ukraine.

**Is this a direct threat to them?**

– Naturally, this is a direct threat in terms of the Russian troops stationed on Transnistrian territory. If you are clear-eyed, you must admit that these troops are the Soviet army, which has been deployed in Moldova since Soviet times. It's only 1,500 people. At that time, that was all the troops that were in Tiraspol. In October 1991, after Moldova declared independence, President Mircea Snegur issued a decree on the [Moldovan] ownership of the Soviet army's property on the territory of Moldova. Unfortunately, this decree claimed ownership of only the property on the right bank of the Dniester River, while what was on the left bank was left to Transnistria. Officers from the 14th Army reported to Snegur. I know this for a fact because we heard Snegur's report in the Parliament. He could never clearly explain why he took such a band-aid solution. Snegur refused to extend Moldovan jurisdiction to officers of the 14th Army.

**Was there such a demand from officers of the 14th Army?**

– Yes, there was such a demand. Most of them wanted to fall under Moldovan jurisdiction because they did not have much choice. They were sort of stuck in limbo between the past and the future. The depot in Cobasna, which housed 45,000 tonnes of weapons brought from



Czechoslovakia, the GDR and Hungary,<sup>8</sup> was essentially left unattended. The Transnistrians started to sell these weapons. On 1 March 1992, the war between Transnistria and Moldova broke out, and, on 2 March, Russian President Boris Yeltsin issued a decree to put the 14th Army under Russian jurisdiction. Let me draw your attention to the fact that it was as late as March 1992 that the 14th Army came under Russian jurisdiction. And, since then, Russian troops have been stationed on the territory of Transnistria. Of course, there is no agreement that regulates their stay on that territory. It is important to understand that Russia did not send its troops to Transnistrian territory but simply brought the 14th Army under its jurisdiction. In other words, to some extent, all this was the result of our own folly.

**How capable is the 14th Army now? In fact, for the last 30 years this army has been slowly deteriorating. Is it realistic for the Russian Federation to use the potential of this army?**

– There are now two corps of Russian troops in Transnistria. The first corps comprises the remnants of the 14th Army, which guards the depot in Cobasna and does nothing else. The headcount is probably a couple of hundred servicemen at most. The second corps is the Russian peacekeeping forces, which are deployed on the territory of the PMR together with peacekeepers from Moldova, Transnistria, and Ukraine. Their stay is regulated by a 1992 agreement, i.e., these Russian peacekeeping forces are legally stationed on Moldovan territory.

The replacement of these peacekeeping forces with a UN contingent has been under discussion for years. At some point there was an idea that it should be an OSCE peacekeeping mission. But, as you may be aware, the OSCE does not even have the status of an international organization, let alone an armed force. It would be good if a UN contingent could be brought in, but this decision would have to be approved by the Security Council. This is not possible because Russia has the right of veto and would block such a decision with 100% probability.

<sup>8</sup> Cobasna is a village in the Ribnița District of the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR, aka Transnistria). In the 1940s, armament depots were set up there. Most of the ammunition was brought there after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Warsaw Pact countries. In 2000, the weapons and ammunition stored there amounted to 42,000 tonnes. Before 2004, about 50% of the weapons, military vehicles, and ammunition stored there had been removed or destroyed. At present, about 20,000 tonnes of military items are stored in the depot, more than half of which are unserviceable. The warehouse in Cobasna is the largest military depot in Europe and is guarded by an operational group of Russian troops, which is the successor to the 14th Army, which came under Russian jurisdiction after the collapse of the USSR.



**You said that General Lebed played a major role in escalating this conflict. Can you please elaborate on this?**

– The General's personal traits and personality played a major role here. Lebed was a typical hawk, and he couldn't pass up such an opportunity. The fact is that, for any general or serviceman, a war or military conflict is an opportunity to add stars to their epaulets. It is a window of opportunity for them. You can understand the military from this point of view. They shoot first and talk later. On the other hand, I want to say that we also had our own hawk, General Ion Costaş,<sup>9</sup> who headed the Ministry of Interior of Moldova. He, too, was determined to solve the issue militarily, although Moldova didn't have an army back then. There is some semblance of an army now, but back then we had nothing. My understanding is that General Lebed carried out this sortie without the Kremlin's instructions, but they managed to get the situation under control. Russian tanks went as far as Bender but did not go any further.

Going back to the situation of the PMR army and its combat readiness, it is unlikely that these 1,500 men can make any dramatic difference in the war in Ukraine or the situation in Moldova. And that is why they are scared. They have some weapons and even four defence zones, but their morale is extremely low.

Our Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian,<sup>10</sup> has met and spoken to Transnistrian representatives many times. I know Serebrian very well. He is our former ambassador to Germany and France. He is convinced that they are scared now. They definitely don't want to go to war, and they are afraid that Ukraine might attack them. The allegations that the Ukrainian side is responsible for the recent explosions in Tiraspol do not hold water.<sup>11</sup> According to Moldovan data, this is most likely the result of internal squabbles among Transnistrian elites. Yes, there is indeed a radical group in Transnistria that supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is ready to fight on the side of Russia, but these are marginal sentiments that do not have wide support. The number of bellicose Transnistrians does not exceed 5–6%. Such extremist groups exist all over the world; I wouldn't take them seriously.

<sup>9</sup> Ion Costaş (b. 1944) is a Moldovan military and political figure. From 3 June 1990 to 5 February 1992, he served as the Minister of Interior of Moldova, and as the Minister of Defence of Moldova from 5 February to 29 July 1992. In 2010, his book *Transnistria 1989–1992: Chronicle of an 'Undeclared' War* [Transnistria, 1989–1992. Cronica unui război "nedeclarat"], presenting his view of the 1992 Transnistrian conflict, was published.

<sup>10</sup> Oleg Serebrian (b. 1969) is a Moldovan politician and diplomat. He has been Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova since 2022.

<sup>11</sup> On 25 April 2022, there were several explosions in the building of the Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol, the capital of the PMR. President of Moldova Maia Sandu stated that the blasts in the PMR were the result of 'internal differences between various groups in Transnistria that have an interest in destabilizing the situation'.

UN Secretary General António Guterres visited Moldova the other day.<sup>12</sup> During his visit, he noted that the 5+2 format for resolving the Transnistrian conflict is becoming a thing of the past.<sup>13</sup> Since the group includes Russia and Ukraine, which are now irreconcilable enemies, it is impossible to reach any consensus in this format.

**Yes, Ukraine has completely severed diplomatic relations with Russia.<sup>14</sup>**

– Guterres praised Moldova for starting a direct dialogue with Transnistria, and he even suggested that the UN should be involved in the new 1+1 format. However, I don't think that Transnistria will want to reach a peaceful settlement, as it wants to be independent. They enjoy it. (*Laughs*)

If you compare this conflict with, say, the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or even Donbas in Ukraine, you could say that the Transnistrian conflict is the only conflict in the post-Soviet space where everything is developing quite peacefully. We have joint sports teams at the Olympics and world tournaments. Transnistrian athletes compete under the Moldovan flag and when they win prizes they shed tears to the sounds of the Moldovan anthem. The Transnistrian football club Sheriff plays under the Moldovan flag.

Transnistria has no infrastructure of its own to connect with the outside world. They fly via the airport in Chişinău. The Orthodox Church in Transnistria is subordinated to the Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova.<sup>15</sup> All of the above give grounds for guarded optimism. Perhaps Transnistria will follow in the footsteps of Gagauzia and agree to autonomous status as part of Moldova. Maybe, but I wouldn't say that for sure.

If, God forbid, Russia appears at Moldova's borders, Transnistria might become active, but at this point they are scared. It is difficult to predict anything.

**Coming back to the political processes in the 1990s, I would like to ask you about the first president of Moldova, Mircea Snegur.<sup>16</sup> What kind of person was he, and what was the impact of his personality on the political processes that were taking place in Moldova? Moldova managed to get international recognition quite rapidly: within a few years, 130 countries recognized its independence. I noticed that Snegur and several other**

<sup>12</sup> António Guterres paid an official visit to Moldova on 9–10 May 2022.

<sup>13</sup> The 5+2 format for resolving the Transnistrian conflict, which involves the US, Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE and the EU plus Moldova and Transnistria, was established immediately after the end of the hot phase of the conflict.

<sup>14</sup> On 24 February 2022, Ukraine cut diplomatic ties with Russia.

<sup>15</sup> The Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova is a self-governing body within the Russian Orthodox Church.

<sup>16</sup> Mircea Snegur (b. 1940) was the first President of Moldova (1990–1997).

**Moldovan presidents were natives of the Florești District of Moldova.<sup>17</sup> Were there old patron–client relationships that had developed back in the Soviet period? Can we say that the Florești District gave Moldova a post-Soviet political elite?**

– Mircea Snegur and Petru Lucinschi<sup>18</sup> do indeed originally come from the *Florești* District, but this is just a coincidence. I don't see any cronyism in it. Mircea Snegur was the Central Committee Secretary for Agriculture, and he held a PhD in Agricultural Sciences. I know him very well. First, I want to say that he is a decent man. He is not corrupt. I know this for sure. In addition, he felt insecure, as he is of an agrarian background. He didn't know his way in politics; he wasn't aware of many things. He lacked determination. He often withdrew or wanted advice on how to do the right thing. At first, he served as the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Moldavia when he was elected. He was competing for this position with Lucinschi. This was during the first term of the independent parliament. He was then supported by the unionists, but he did not give them the positions they had hoped for. He rejected the idea of unification with Romania and distanced himself from Russia.

In terms of international recognition, I know this situation very well. At that time, I was the Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission for International Relations, and I was Deputy Foreign Minister afterwards. I know the way we approached other countries, and this was probably the proper approach. I was the Chairman of our delegation to the Council of Europe. In 1994–1995, we became a member of the Council of Europe. We received strong support from Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. There was also support from Bulgaria, though to a lesser extent. We had great relations with the Italians and the French. At that time, socialist parties were in power there. I used to work in Moscow, in the protocol service, and had contacts with the French Socialist Party and the Italian Socialist Party. Thanks to this experience, I knew very many parliamentarians personally.

**So, you also deserve some credit for that?**

– To a certain extent. (*Smiling*) I don't want to pose as a hero, but it did play a role. At that time, Moldova was making steps in the right direction, but later on it started going round in circles.

**Why did the agrarian party roll back these European integration processes?**

– The agrarian party comprised mainly collective farm chairmen.

<sup>17</sup> An area in the north of Moldova.

<sup>18</sup> Petru Lucinschi (b. 1940) is a Moldovan politician and former President of Moldova (1997–2001).

**So, they had no understanding of international politics?**

– Yes, absolutely. In the first parliament, the unionists<sup>19</sup> had a strong hand. The first parliament of Moldova was composed of 380 MPs, of whom 105 were unionists. The second-most influential faction comprised the agrarians, i.e., collective farm chairmen and representatives of the district committees of the Communist Party. The Soviet Moldavia faction was the third largest. There really was such a faction. It consisted of Transnistrians, the Gagauz and some party officials. And the fourth faction, headed by me, comprised independent MPs. We were few in number, as few as 25 people, but we were very influential because we chaired 4 of the 12 parliamentary commissions.

We had representatives from Gagauzia and Transnistria. In 1994, we lost momentum, and the agrarians came to power. Unfortunately, they still thought like collective farm chairmen. They had the mindset of a leader like Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, who used to head a trucking division.<sup>20</sup> I can draw a parallel, as I was an observer during the presidential election in Ukraine in 2010. We had meetings and conversations with Yanukovich's entourage, and it was terrible.

**Did the Transnistrian conflict have any impact on Moldova's aspirations for EU integration?**

– No, the Transnistrian conflict was not a direct disincentive, but it deterred foreign investment because potential investors feared war. Transnistria could in no way interfere with Moldova's EU integration. First, they had no say in the international arena. Second, there have been precedents regarding the integration of countries that have unresolved territorial issues. For example, Cyprus, which has an unresolved territorial conflict with Turkey. If part of a divided country wants to join the EU, then why not? From this point of view, it is the right thing to do.

Ukraine may well integrate into the EU even without settling the Donbas and Crimean issues. How long the war in Ukraine will last and how it will end, this is another story; will a peace treaty be signed, or will it transform into some form of frozen conflict? It's difficult to predict anything at this point.

At this stage, neither side has given up hope of winning. For the time being, therefore, a negotiation process is unlikely.

<sup>19</sup> The movement for the unification of Moldova and Romania.

<sup>20</sup> Viktor Yanukovich was the President of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014. He was ousted from the country during the Revolution of Dignity. Prior to his political career, he worked for 20 years as the director of the Donetsk Regional Motor Transport Association.

**Coming back to the processes in Moldova, I would like to talk about GUAM.<sup>21</sup> This was an initiative launched by President Leonid Kuchma, and there were attempts to resuscitate it later under Viktor Yushchenko. Why did the initiative fail? It was essentially a counterweight to the monopoly of Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea–Caspian Sea region.**

– To begin with, GUAM did not enjoy much support in Moldova. Moldova was sidelined in this project. It wasn't clear what prospects this would open up for Moldova. Frankly speaking, the prospects for this community were unclear even for Ukraine. On the one hand, it opened up the prospect of building an oil pipeline across the Black Sea; on the other hand, it was clear that implementation of such projects was extremely difficult.

Moldova supported this initiative as a form of cooperation in the Black Sea region. Let's say this is something akin to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSEC). We are involved in it, although there are no real outcomes. My acquaintances, who are BSEC diplomatic staff, are of course happy as they receive high salaries, but they honestly admit that they do nothing. (*Laughs*) From this point of view, GUAM is yet another BSEC, only in the case of GUAM it didn't even go so far as to create bureaucratic structures.

Azerbaijan's membership in GUAM was of particular interest, since it could act as an oil and gas exporter for Ukraine and Moldova, even though they cannot meet all our demands in terms of commodities. They simply do not have such huge reserves. They might be enough for Moldova, but definitely not for Ukraine.

Another important element is how to deliver these commodities. If the route goes across Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova, the question is how cost-effective it will be. Therefore, the successful implementation of such projects is very doubtful. GUAM was a political project rather than an economic one filled with real content. Actually, the project failed because it did not have a real economic component. GUAM, of course, was a counterweight to the CIS, but it was declarative in nature.

**You have met Ukrainian presidents and engaged with them personally. How would you describe them? What personal traits did you find most remarkable?**

– I met Kuchma and Kravchuk, who died yesterday.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> GUAM is a regional international organization established in 1997 at the initiative of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. Its members include Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan (from 1999 to 2005), Azerbaijan and Moldova. The name is an acronym of the names of the member countries.

<sup>22</sup> Ukraine's first President, Leonid Kravchuk, died on 10 May 2022.

**Both these presidents left a mark in history which is surrounded by controversy. Yesterday, when the news of Kravchuk's death became known, there were some rather harsh statements on Ukrainian social media. On the one hand, he was the first president of independent Ukraine; on the other hand, he signed the Budapest Memorandum,<sup>23</sup> which in fact turned out to be empty promises. What are your personal impressions of Kravchuk and Kuchma?**

– These were people with a Soviet mentality. Kravchuk certainly loved Ukraine. I want to say that Kravchuk was a very sly person. A real fox. During a conversation he would catch every phrase – was quick to grasp the meaning. Kuchma, on the contrary, was very slow in his reactions.

Kravchuk was not the initiator of the Belovezh Accords, which were signed by Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, but he agreed to it. From this point of view, Kravchuk's role in the collapse of the USSR is huge. Kravchuk signed the Budapest Memorandum under pressure. It was not so much the Russians who wanted this memorandum as the Americans. I had a chance to be in the US in 1992, right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I was the pro-rector of a Russian-American university. I was in the US in August–September 1992. At the time, I was lecturing at various universities in the US and meeting various politicians. Their attitude to Russia was different then. The USSR had lost the Cold War.

**I want to clarify: were American officials proud of winning the Cold War?**

– They were happy, but they recognized that it was a kind of an unexpected gift for them. The Soviet Union collapsed because of Gorbachev's folly. Now, of course, they no longer acknowledge that, but that is not the point.

When I was in the US, the American officials I met had studied my biography and found out that I had served in the Soviet Army for two years in the Strategic Missile Forces. In one conversation, they asked me how the Soviet missile forces were organized. As the Soviet Union was already a thing of the past, this was no longer classified information. I could conclude from this conversation that they were afraid that every Soviet republic had nuclear weapons, whereas nuclear warheads were deployed only in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The other republics had none. The missile forces were integrated. They were not subordinated to republican centres, only to Moscow.

<sup>23</sup> The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances was a document guaranteeing security to Ukraine in exchange for its accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It was signed on 5 December 1994 by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The 43rd Missile Army, which was stationed in Vinnytsia, reported neither to the Kyiv military district nor to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The strategic forces reported to Moscow. All command and control came from Moscow. I served in the Smolensk missile army, but it was deployed on the territory of Belarus. I can assure you that the Belarusians did not even know we were there.

The Americans were afraid there were strategic missile forces somewhere else, so they went for the peaceful dissolution of the USSR. They put diplomatic pressure on Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus for them to give up their nuclear weapons. The scientific, technological, and industrial potential of Ukraine was sufficient to produce nuclear weapons then and still is now. To begin with, Ukraine has all the necessary natural resources to do so.

The Budapest Memorandum was an American initiative. It did not have the status of a state treaty and was not ratified by the parliament. It was more of a declaration. Regrettably, this was Kravchuk's miscalculation. But as a political leader Kravchuk did a lot for Ukraine at that time. I don't know if anyone else could have done more.

**Clearly, under those circumstances Kravchuk exchanged recognition of Ukraine's independence for nuclear weapons.**

– Yes, in a way. It was not as easy as it seems now. Moldova was a simpler case. It is a small country. Ukraine is a heavyweight, a big country with strong industrial and economic potential. I think that at the time the US was slightly wary of Ukraine. Look at how concerned the US is with North Korea's ballistic missile launches. But this is a tiny country, and Ukraine is huge, so these concerns and caution were justified.

**Prof. Burian, I would like to ask another question; this is more about the 2000s, about the success of the Communist Party in Moldova. In virtually all post-Soviet countries, the Communist movement had withered away by the end of the 1990s. At best they could act as junior partners to the ruling coalition. In Moldova, on the contrary, the Communists came to power in 2001 and held power until 2009. How can you explain their success in Moldova under the new circumstances?**

– Their predecessors paved the way to power for the Communists. In 1998, after four years of the agrarians being in office, the mob – unionists, liberals, and others – came to power and ran the country into the ground in three years. Actually, corruption and other nasty phenomena typical of the transition period date back to those days in Moldova. The Communists played on the dissatisfaction of Moldovans with those political forces.



This was the new Party of Communists [of Moldova] formed by Voronin. They were not the successors to the former Communist Party of Moldavia. They gained a majority in parliament and elected their own president. Moldova was then a parliamentary republic. The Communists managed to gain a foothold in power for eight years.

In 2009, popular unrest started. The parliament building and presidential office were set on fire. My understanding is that it was organized by external forces. By whom, how and why is difficult to say.

On the other hand, Moldovan society is very multifaceted. It is deeply divided even now: 53% want to join the EU, and 47% want to have close ties with Russia. Let's say Moldovans are not eager to join the [Eurasian] Customs Union, but part of society wants to have some form of cooperation with Russia.

**What motivates such aspirations? Is it about cultural ties or something else? After all, Moldova has no common border with Russia, whereas not only does the EU share borders with Moldova, but it also offers an attractive liberal economic model. And what does the Russian Federation have to offer Moldova?**

– Overall, the attitude to the EU is positive. The fact is that we have very few Russians. Only about 6%. I cannot say why this is so. It is quite irrational, and nobody can explain it. Still, this division into supporters of the EU and closer cooperation with Russia has been virtually unchanged for a very long time.

**So there hasn't been any fluctuation or drifting on the part of those who support cooperation with Russia into the camp of those who support EU integration?**

– Yes, Maia Sandu's party won only because they gained the support of the Moldovan diaspora, and it is not absolutely clear what caused such a surge in activity among the Moldovan diaspora.

**Do you mean Moldovans who are now abroad and vote at Moldovan embassies?**

– Yes, precisely. But it wasn't just embassy voting. A huge number of polling stations were opened abroad. Maia Sandu's current position in favour of neutrality and her refusal to join the anti-Russian sanctions have earned her increasing support in Moldova itself. I think Ukrainians should not feel offended by Moldova. We are a small country, and our position can't change much.

But the popularity of Maia Sandu's party is shaky, so it is difficult to predict what the situation will be during the next election. At the moment, opinion polls show that if there were elections in Moldova, three parties would enter the parliament: Maia Sandu's party, the Bloc of Communists and Socialists, and the ȘOR Party. The latter is the party of Ilan Shor,<sup>24</sup> a major fraudster. He was involved in the theft of 1 billion dollars. He is now in Israel and runs his party from there. He has other parties in the Moldovan Parliament. Can you imagine such an absurd situation? (*smiling*)

**I can certainly imagine it, since Ukraine too had such politicians in the past and still does now. Just look at the scandal involving Pavlo Lazarenko.<sup>25</sup> It is surprising that this does not stop people from voting for fraudsters.**

– People dislike fraudsters here, but conventional wisdom has it that everyone steals.

**I did not plan to refer to most recent events, but unfortunately Russian aggression against Ukraine is of a global nature, and it is simply impossible to avoid the topic. The international security system established after the Second World War has failed. We see that the UN and a number of other international organizations have been virtually helpless. The world community has no effective means to stop the aggressor. In this context, the question arises as to how the ongoing war will affect the international system of collective security.**

– The situation in the international arena has changed dramatically since the collapse of the USSR. Since the 1990s, very complex processes have been taking place at the UN. At one time, the UN recognized that Russia was the successor to the Soviet Union. On that basis, Russia received the right of a veto on the Security Council. Now Russia can legally block any possibility of changing the UN Charter. UN reform is thus impossible.

How to assess Russia's current actions is also a question. After all, the United States also used to abuse their right of veto on the Security Council to a large extent. Therefore, they are two peas in a pod, I would say.

This is all true of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.<sup>26</sup> The principle of the inviolability of borders drawn after the Second World War was violated by the very fact of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This was followed

<sup>24</sup> Ilan Shor (or Șor) (b. 1987) is a Moldovan politician and businessman of Jewish origin and leader of the party bearing the same name. In 2017, he was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison for 'a \$1 billion theft' from Moldova's banking system. Shor fled the country. In 2020, he was put on an international wanted list.

<sup>25</sup> Pavlo Lazarenko (b. 1953) is a Ukrainian politician; he was Prime Minister of Ukraine in 1996–1997. He was accused of corruption and fled to the US, where he was sentenced to nine years in prison and fined \$10 million for extortion, money laundering, and wire fraud.

<sup>26</sup> The 1975 Helsinki Final Act nailed down the political and territorial outcome of the Second World War.

by the breakup of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. There were a lot of ambiguous developments concerning Kosovo. These are all links in a chain.

Ukraine, incidentally, like Moldova, does not recognize Kosovo's independence. However, the international community not only recognized but even forced the UN's International Court of Justice to recognize the validity of this decision. All of this sets dangerous judicial precedents that can be used, for example, in the situation around Donbas. So, I would say that the situation is complicated when it comes to the UN.

**A recent opinion poll in Moldova showed that a significant proportion of Moldovans believe that Russia's aggression against Ukraine is legitimate.<sup>27</sup> What, in your opinion, is behind such an opinion? Is it the effect of Russian propaganda in Moldova?**

– Based on what is happening in Moldova, as I said above, Moldovan society is multifaceted. At the same time, however, it is quite democratic. Even under the Communists, the opposition channels were not shut down. We have had an open information policy for 30 years of independence. People watch Russian, Romanian, and European channels. By the way, Ukrainian channels are available here too. This makes us very different from Romania. Once you cross the Romanian border, you find yourself in a purely Romanian information field. In Ukraine, by the way, there are restrictions too.

**Yes, these restrictions have been in place since 2014. In Ukraine, in order to watch Russian television, you have to have a satellite dish.**

– Yes, but my acquaintances from Odessa recently told me that people are being forced to take down their satellite dishes. Coming back to Moldova, I would like to say that in Moldova you can get a more or less adequate picture of the situation if you want to. Russian channels are not available everywhere in Moldova.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Russian news programmes have not been broadcast for many years now; only entertainment and educational channels are allowed.

I lecture in Slovakia, and I stay in a hotel and watch Russian channels when I go there. In Moldova you can't watch the Solovyov show;

<sup>27</sup> More than 40% of Moldovan citizens believe Russia's invasion of Ukraine is unjustified and unprovoked. About 23% are convinced that Russia is protecting the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, and another 15.2% believe that the Russian Federation is conducting an 'operation to liberate Ukraine from Nazism'. At the same time, 31.1% of the respondents support Ukraine in the war, and 20% support Russia. Another 30.4% of Moldovan citizens say no one is right in the war in Ukraine. See Markijan Klimkoveckij, 'Počti tret' graždan Moldovy sčitajet, čto Zapad ne dolžen pomogat' Ukraine vojne s Rossiej – opros', *hromadske.ua*, 1 July, 2022 <<https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/pochti-tret-grazhdan-moldovy-schitaet-cto-zapad-ne-dolzhen-pomogat-ukraine-v-vojne-s-rossiej-opros>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

<sup>28</sup> On 19 June 2022, Moldovan President Maia Sandu signed a law on combating disinformation and propaganda which introduced a ban on the broadcasting of Russian news and analytical programmes and the screening of Russian war films.

we don't have it, thank God, but in Slovakia you can. It's true, few people in Slovakia know Russian, unlike in Moldova, where everyone speaks Russian.

Thus, Moldovans can get information from different sources. However, there's always an information war and, of course, some people fall under the influence of propaganda. Still, there are more people who condemn Russia's aggression, and 31% believe that both parties are wrong.

I want to note that these sociological surveys are conducted by Western organizations, and they do not always present an objective picture of the situation. Moldova has opened its doors to Ukrainian refugees. We are now ahead of all other countries in Europe in terms of the number of refugees per capita. Moldova supported all sanctions except the oil and gas embargo. Especially gas, because without gas Moldova will have no electricity and no heat. There's no other way out. Yes, there is an agreement with the European Union that we will receive gas, but there are no technical solutions for that. The oil pipeline from Romania has not been completed. It has been under construction for 8 or 10 years already. In fact, it is business as usual: the money has been stolen. The Romanian and Moldovan presidents have inaugurated the pipeline six times already, but it remains unfinished.

The same goes for electricity. There is an agreement with the European Union that Moldova can connect to the European grid. However, the agreement covers only exports. We have even exported electricity to Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. We have power transmission lines, but they can't be used in reverse mode, and it may take three to four years to build new lines.

At this stage, Moldova gets most of its electricity from the Kuchurgan power station,<sup>29</sup> which runs on gas. They sell us electricity at half the Ukrainian price. We buy electricity from Ukraine for our northern regions. By the way, part of the Odessa region also receives electricity from Kuchurgan. We sell electricity to Ukraine in the south and buy it from Ukraine in the north. If I am not mistaken, we receive it from a coal-fired power plant located in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.<sup>30</sup> The Kuchurgan power plant belongs to Russia, and we are dependent on them. If we refuse to accept gas now, the situation will be extremely difficult. Other EU countries aren't giving up on gas either, e.g., Slovakia and Germany.

<sup>29</sup> The Kuchurgan power station is a thermal power plant located in the town of Dnestrovsc in Transnistria, on the bank of the Kuchurgan estuary. It was privatized by Russian business in 2005. It is part of the Russian Inter RAO energy company.

<sup>30</sup> This refers to the Burshtyn TS (coal-fired power plant), which is located near the town of Burshtyn in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

**Does Moldova have any strategic plan to diversify its gas supplies to make Moldova self-sufficient in terms of energy? It has long been obvious that Russia is using commodities as an element of blackmail.**

– Of course, this is being done. The issue of renewable energy sources and green energy is being studied in detail. The central part of Moldova is particularly promising in this regard due to its mountainous terrain. We are going to use alternative sources of gas supplies. We have conducted negotiations with Azerbaijan. Recently, our Deputy Prime Minister, Nicolae Popescu, paid a visit there.<sup>31</sup>

We launched this policy of energy independence from Russia back in the 1990s, and I was one of those who launched it. As Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, I went to Iran. We drafted 12 agreements with Iran to buy oil, build an oil refinery in Moldova, in Giurgiulești, and so on. Everything was fine; we went together with our Prime Minister, Andrei Sangheli,<sup>32</sup> to Iran and signed these agreements. And then we came up against the tough positions taken by Russia and the US. They ganged up on us. (*Laughs*) Thus, our cooperation with Iran never came to fruition. Maybe we will make it this time.

Interview conducted by YANA PRYMACHENKO

<sup>31</sup> Nicolae Popescu (b. 1981) has been Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova since August 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Andrei Sangheli (b. 1944) is a Moldovan politician and former Prime Minister of Moldova (1992–1997).