

Vladimir Voronin, president of Moldova (2001-2009)

Anna Sous, RFE/RL

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: You're not only a former president, but also a working politician, an opposition politician. You've been the leader of the Communist Party of Moldova for more than 20 years. Even at 74 years old, you're very active. How long is your typical workday?

Vladimir Voronin: As long as necessary. Longer than people who have a standard working day. From 16 to 18 hours is normal.

Anna Sous: Vladimir Nikolayevich, the Communist Party of Moldova is the only Communist party among the countries of the former Soviet Union that has managed to become the ruling party. How do you think Moldova's Communists differ from those in Russia?

Vladimir Voronin: In ideological terms, our action plan isn't really any different. We don't differ from them in terms of being Communists, but in terms of the conditions we act in and work in -- the conditions in which we fight.

Anna Sous: You were Moldova's minister of internal affairs. In 1989, when the ministry's building was set on fire during unrest in Chisinau, you didn't give the order to shoot. Later you said you wouldn't have given the command to shoot even if the ministry building had burned to the ground. Maybe this is how Moldova's Communists differ from those in Russia?

Vladimir Voronin: Of course, the choices we had, and the situation we were in, were such that if I had given the order to shoot, it would have been recognized as constitutional and lawful. But I couldn't do it, for purely human reasons. And I can't imagine giving the order now, either. I was in similar situations too, when I was already president. I can't imagine how anyone could shoot a person or give the order to shoot. It's not compatible with my moral outlook or my logic.

Anna Sous: This Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty project is called "Russia & Me." What kind of Russia is your Russia? Who among Russia's former or current politicians represent Russia for you?

Vladimir Voronin: Lenin, Stalin, Putin.

Anna Sous: In 2003, you refused to sign the so-called Kozak Memorandum, a plan for the federalization of Moldova that was drawn up by Russia's presidential representative in Moldova, Dmitry Kozak, to give Russia the right to station Russian troops on the territory of Transdniestria. Do you remember that day, when you refused to sign the memorandum? How do you view your decision 12 years on?

Vladimir Voronin: A very serious task was put before us at that time. This task was set before I was even elected to this high position. I was born in Transdniestria. All this was very intimate for me, very painful. And in the very first days of my time in office, I began to meet with the then-leaders of Transdniestria. We tried to find every possible alternative; all the ways we could unite the country. We understood that living on different sides for 20 years was very difficult, and that we had to resolve the unification issue. Unfortunately, we weren't destined to resolve it.

Anna Sous: There were stories going around saying that after you backtracked on the memorandum, Putin's plane turned around...

Vladimir Voronin: No one flew anywhere. No one stopped anyone from doing anything. We just had the modest hope that we could move forward. And this meant that we could not sign that document. To sum it up, if truth be told, it would have violated the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. And it wouldn't have given us anything, because we weren't the only ones in power. There were other parties, there were representatives of these parties in parliament, and they made up the so-called opposition. Article 11 of our constitution does not allow military units from other nations to station themselves on Moldovan territory. And there was no way we could violate the constitution. Even if we had signed the deal, the opposition would have gone to the Constitutional Court and had the decision reversed. In this situation, I couldn't allow Vladimir Vladimirovich or any of us the political luxury.

Anna Sous: Crimea and Transdniestria. The two are frequently compared these days. What do they have in common, and what are their differences?

Vladimir Voronin: They have nothing in common. Only the fact that Crimea was cut off from Russia for many years -- even longer than Transdniestria has been by now. And Transdniestria has been cut off from Moldova for nearly 25 years.

Anna Sous: And who does Crimea belong to?

Vladimir Voronin: Crimea? It's as it was decided. Crimea is the thing it was decided to be. Why are you testing me? Does history mean something, does tell us something? Everyone says we should return to historical values, to how things were before. Let's do that. History gets rewritten in different ways. Absolutely everyone knows how Crimea was given to Ukraine -- when, by whom, and under what circumstances. Now, the legality of its [status] has simply been restored. In addition, who doesn't know or remember how much Russian blood was spilled on Crimean land in various wars? With the Turks, and before the Turks, and with the fascists. What are we talking about?

Anna Sous: So does that mean it's possible to change borders? In your party's program, there are four main principles: European freedoms and standards, strategic partnership with Russia, Moldovan identity, and Moldova's territorial integrity.

Vladimir Voronin: And where do you see anything about changing borders?

Anna Sous: Crimea. The territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Vladimir Voronin: That's not Crimea's program, it's our party's. We deal with our own issues. We stand on principle in our own country, but over there, it's the Russian government, and they have their own people who can address those issues.

Anna Sous: Can you recall your worst day in terms of relations with Russia? Perhaps the day when you didn't sign the memorandum?

Vladimir Voronin: Yes, I suppose so. We had excellent relations both vertically and horizontally -- on the level of people, collectives, ministries, projects, treaties, agreements, exports, imports, cultural programs and all the rest. Everything ran smoothly. That day when we didn't sign the agreement... to this day I keep turning over the situation in my head. That day proved to be not entirely successful, to say the least. Since then, for more than 10 years now, relations have been a lot cooler.

Anna Sous: Do you link that to the wine war, too? What did Russia in fact want when it banned imports of Moldovan wine? And did it get what it wanted?

Vladimir Voronin: Everything was jumbled up together. The fact that we did not sign that document had an influence, but so did the shameful behavior of those who produce our wine output.

Anna Sous: Your wife, Taisia Mikhailovna, is Ukrainian. I know that she does charity work in Moldova, that she helps with social projects. Perhaps she might be able to help those who need help in Ukraine -- refugees, the wounded, soldiers? Does her view on events in Ukraine coincide with yours?

Vladimir Voronin: Never during my presidency or at any other time has she ever interfered with or become involved in anything political. She's worked with children. For 28 years, she worked in preschool institutions. With help from a number of sponsors -- including Western ones, by the way -- she founded a so-called children's city for children who have no parents, and organized excellent facilities for them. The problem of Ukraine is, of course, a painful one for Moldova. They are our neighbors. We have the biggest Ukrainian diaspora in the world, about 20 percent of our population, one-fifth. This is significant in quantitative terms. These are very active people. They are on our team, in the government, and in parliament. And we are in actual fact very deeply concerned about events in Ukraine.

Anna Sous: Who do you think began the war in Ukraine?

Vladimir Voronin: It's the same thing that took place in Moldova on April 2, 2009, when for no reason at all a group -- not a group but about 20,000 people -- appeared and launched attacks on the government's two most important buildings, the president's office and the parliament. It was the exact same thing with the Maidan in Kyiv -- it's just that the rehearsal took place in Chisinau. Unlike in Kyiv, we held back and did not use weapons. We solved the problem peacefully. We stood up to this. And I had to give the command that we would give up the president's office and parliament, strange as it may seem. It's very easy to pass judgment at a distance; it's easy to evaluate a situation standing on the sidelines. It's easy to be zealous and say, "I would have done this or that," when you weren't there in the epicenter of those events, when people's lives don't depend on your decision.

Anna Sous: Moldova signed an Association Agreement with the European Union right after Euromaidan, and you said in an interview at the time that "we have taken a decision -- to go down the road of European modernization of the country, to bring our legal foundations in line with European laws. We have begun to build Europe here at home." What advice would you give the current Moldovan leaders with regard to the West? And if you were till the president of Moldova, how would you now build relations with Russia, given the events in eastern Ukraine?

Vladimir Voronin: Pay attention to the phrase "European modernization" and don't confuse it with European integration. These are completely different things. We need to get the country all set. The country should be continuously modernized, brought up to date.

Anna Sous: On relations with Russia... You named Vladimir Putin as a person who, for you, personifies Russia. How would you advise the current leadership of Moldova to interact with Vladimir Putin?

Vladimir Voronin: Normally.

Anna Sous: What are the secrets from your presidency?

Vladimir Voronin: There aren't any secrets. You need to at least look and see what's happening around you. The heads of government from different continents are lining up to come to Moscow and talk to and meet with Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, we're sitting here and showing how clever we are. Thousands of people, tens of thousands of Moldovans work in Russia. Apart from that, there's the fact that no Moldovan exports can go to Russia. This isn't a policy or a government strategy. And these people shouldn't be sitting in the top seats. They need to leave quickly, decently, nicely, according to their consciences -- if they have them.

Anna Sous: You have colleagues who are political "survivors" -- for example, the president of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka; the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev. There are lots of presidents who have been in power for over 20 years. Were you tempted to be president for longer? Wouldn't you like to try to do what they've done?

Vladimir Voronin: In eight years, I signed approximately 8,000 decrees, renewed different laws, made various decisions, appointments. Only two of them were attacked in the Constitutional Court. I have not altered a single period, not changed a single comma, in the constitution. And I complied with the constitution. Two terms is two terms. No other ideas or wishes. I still have the feeling that plans and initiatives were not fulfilled, that we didn't manage to finish things for various reasons -- mainly objective, material, and financial reasons. There's a feeling of dissatisfaction, that there was a lot we didn't accomplish. But you know, life doesn't come to an end. One thing ends, but another begins.

Anna Sous: What would you advise your colleagues -- why is it good to be a former president?

Vladimir Voronin: I didn't say that it was good to be a former [president].

Anna Sous: Why isn't it frightening to be a former [president]?

Vladimir Voronin: I didn't say that it isn't good to be a former president. There are good sides, too.

Anna Sous: Why should people not be afraid to leave?

Vladimir Voronin: If we're talking about Moldova, about the first two presidents who came before me -- Mircea Snegur and Petru Lucinschi -- there's a small difference between us. Both before my presidency and during it, I was the chairman of the party, and I'm still the chairman of the party. I have plenty to problems to deal with, and, God willing, enough time and health to handle the work that comes that comes with the high post entrusted to me by our country's Communists.

Anna Sous: What does a former president receive from the Moldovan government by law?

Vladimir Voronin: A pension.

Anna Sous: A large pension?

Vladimir Voronin: No. A pension which, if you converted it into dollars, would be 400-450 dollars.

Anna Sous: A car, a residence?

Vladimir Voronin: No. I have security guards and immunity. Nothing more. No residences. I have a fifth-floor flat that I was living in 25 years ago, so nothing has changed. I didn't change anything while I was president.