

Petru Lucinschi, president of Moldova (1996-2001)

Anna Sous, RFE/RL

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

RFE/RL: What is your Russia like? Who would be the three politicians you most identify with your vision of Russia?

Petru Lucinschi: I worked in Russia for a total of 12 years. Even earlier, I started my [political] life in the Komsomol, [Soviet Communist youth organization]. So we would spend whole months in Russia at conferences and meetings. Once, while arguing with [late] General [Aleksandr] Lebed about Transdniester, I told him: "Wait a second. I have done no less for Russia than you have." He agreed. We used to be together with Russia within a single state. Whenever we would go abroad, in a way we were representing Russia.

I would mention Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin. I met him when he was working in Sverdlovsk [from the beginning of his career until 1985; the city is now called Yekaterinburg]. And it so happened that we found it easy to communicate. This lasted until his death [in 2007]. I must say, he was the face of Russia. He was a remarkable person because, despite being a very authoritarian man, he managed to adapt himself to the new realities of Russia and become a democrat. We were always able to reach mutual understanding whenever a firm position had to be taken. The second person would be [former Prime Minister] Yevgeny Primakov. We met when we were young and remained very close for a long time. Our families are friends too. Later our ways parted, but we [the families] are still in touch. And the third -- among the people I am close with -- would be Leonid Tyagachyov, former president of Russia's Olympic Committee.

RFE/RL: I notice that photographs with Boris Yeltsin and with Yevgeny Primakov are on display in your office. But if we are to talk about negative symbols -- who would be three who represent Russia negatively?

Lucinschi: You know, to my regret, there are a lot of them. To avoid naming names I'll just say that lately in Russia there are quite a few people who like talking to the rest of the world from a position of power, in a condescending manner, in a style of a "big brother." This is most acutely felt by the former Soviet republics. I will not name these people because they are currently functioning politicians.

RFE/RL: And are they also in the photographs on the wall of your office?

Lucinschi: No. There are none here. These are people who believe only in force, because they themselves respect only force. I am talking primarily about military might and pressure -- there

could also be economic power. Sadly, I know some of those people quite well.

RFE/RL: And you don't want to name them?

Lucinschi: I will not name them. Let them sort it out among themselves.

RFE/RL: At one point you were called one of the most pro-Russian among all post-Soviet politicians -- after [Belarusian President Alyaksandr] Lukashenka and [Tajik leader] Emomali Rahmon -- by the Russian daily Kommersant. This was despite the fact that your first visit as president to Russia took place only after you had already gone to Ukraine and Romania. In contrast, Lukashenko has always gone to Russia first thing after each reelection.

Lucinschi: As far as Russia is concerned, I am all for the closest possible ties. It should be noted that since the earliest days of Moldova's independence, among all parties in parliament, including those that envision merging Moldova with Romania, everyone has always agreed that we want to have good relations with Russia. We have some issues with the CIS. This organization exists and allows us to meet -- which is good -- but it is not a functioning or effective body. But we do want to have good relations with Russia.

Sous: And do you agree with Kommersant calling you a pro-Russian politician?

Lucinschi: Interestingly, my situation is similar to that of [Soviet World War II Marshal Konstantin] Rokossovsky [who was made Polish defense minister by Stalin after the war]. The Polish people had considered him to be a Russian, and the Russians, a Pole. And now some of those from the more nationalist part of the political spectrum consider me to be a pro-Moscow, pro-Russian politician. No. I am pro-Moldovan; I am pro-Russian; I am pro-European. I want Moldova, to the extent that it can, to have intense relations, first of all, with its neighbors and also with the rest of the world.

RFE/RL: At the moment, even compared to Georgia and Ukraine, Moldova is the closest to the European Union. At the same time, pro-European policies have not cost Moldova nearly as much as they are now costing Ukraine. [Moldova's first president,] Mircea Snegur, you, and former President Vladimir Voronin were all at some point [Communist] Party functionaries. But at the same time, all of you moved on to carry out free-market reforms and all pursued Moldovan integration with the EU. Is there something special about Moldova that makes former and current communists lead the country toward Europe?

Lucinschi: Objectively speaking, we are all in Europe. I said this to the Russians, to Vladimir Putin: "Listen, where has Russia been all this time? Where was Russia in 18th and 19th centuries? In Europe." Not to mention Peter the Great. At [a Kremlin-sponsored conference in] Valdai, we were presented with sociological research about which leader matched best with the expectations of the Russian people. The current leaders received 12 percent. Lenin got 10 percent, and Stalin, 9 percent. But Peter the Great got 33 percent. It is a historical fact -- to say nothing about the history of culture and literature... This is why we are in Europe.

Geographically, we have always been a part of Europe. But what should Moldova do now? Imagine that you are president. Is there anyone who would deny that Europe is the cradle of culture, economy, civilization? So, tell me, could I do something different for my people and not try to become an equal member of this family? The doors to Europe have begun to open for all sorts of things, for youths most of all. And even more so now that there is visa-free travel to Europe for Moldovan citizens. About 700,000 have used this opportunity in just one year. Is that bad? We are civilized people. I know many people who want to go back to the 15th century. They operate only through force -- they want to pressure others and make people afraid. Is that a policy? We are not allowing any [foreign] military bases on our territory, except for the Russian forces in Transdnister. So what is the problem? Why should Russia be suspicious of us? Nonetheless, suspicion is growing. They say if we want to join [the EU], we'll have to choose -- either here or there.

RFE/RL: You were president of a small, poor country that transits Russian natural gas via a pipeline. In addition, Moldova's economy is quite dependent on Russia. Russia is a big country with serious levers of influence. People rarely talk about it in public, but were you ever afraid for yourself or for the fate of your country? After all, it was tiny Moldova against huge Russia.

Lucinschi: No, never. We never reached that stage, at least while I was in the office. I managed to reach agreements with Russia on all issues. We were always able to talk. There are processes for this -- this is what politics is for. And the Moldovan people have never had this kind of fear. Thank God, we lived with Russia for centuries. What could happen? Maybe, war. But if a war starts, it will be the worst possible war. It will be World War III and there won't be a World War IV. No, I wasn't afraid.

RFE/RL: After the [March 2014] annexation of Crimea [by Russia], many observers have been predicting who might be the next. Some say Belarus; some, Baltic states; and some, Moldova. Could Moldova be next? Could the frozen conflict in Transdnistr be rekindled?

Lucinschi: This idea is in the heads of some Russian politicians. But I dismiss it as an official Russian policy.

RFE/RL: During your presidency, what was the worst day, the most difficult one, in terms of relations with Russia?

Lucinschi: I know the exact day. I was the president-elect, but had not assumed the post yet. It was December 30 [1996]. Moldovagas received a telegram from Gazprom informing them that the gas will be switched off for a failure to pay. There were problems with payments at that time. I found [then-Russian Prime Minister Viktor] Chernomyrdin. We had worked together at the [Communist Party] Central Committee at some point in the past. I said: "Listen, here is the situation. It's New Year's. We will sort it out." He said: "It's good you called me, because the Gazprom people are right here." Can you imagine if the gas had been turned off for the New Year? There was another episode when a similar situation occurred but then I dealt with Boris Yeltsin. I was interviewed by [journalist Andrei] Karaulov at that moment and Boris Nikolayevich called. He was calling back because I had tried to contact him earlier. It really is a two- or even

one-minute thing to solve that problem. And the happiest day was in 1999. There was an OSCE summit in Istanbul. In the final document, Russia committed to withdraw all armaments from Transdniester over the next three years. They have withdrawn half since then, and the other half is still there. About 1,000 soldiers are guarding storage facilities. Is this normal? Transdniester, or most of it, was part of Moldova, of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic since the day of its creation [in 1924]. Can this stripe of land be an independent territory? These days, that is nonsense. We are not starting a war. This is not an option. It's some sort of dumb stubbornness... I am sorry. What is the point when we are prepared to offer any status? We already negotiated this at one point, but now we are back at the starting point and no one understands why. I also don't understand why some forces in Russia support this separatism? How can it be that in a state like Russia some think that we in Moldova have people that Russia supports in Gagauzia and in Transdniester and that these people can pressure Chisinau to adopt positions more to Russia's liking? I can't imagine which positions Moldova could adopt that could be a problem for Russia. This is just wrong because none of the people of Moldova are anti-Russian. This support [for separatism] is just perplexing. Take the embargo. Wine can be exported to Russia from Gagauzia, but it can't if it comes from another region -- even if the wine is better? This is just ridiculous.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, I want to be positive. There is no sense in any of this, not for Russia, not for Ukraine, not for the rest of the world. Russia itself is really suffering from it. And Ukraine is as well, of course. It really pains me to see what is happening, because the country is being rocked. It is a real hot spot, a real hot spot. We also have parts of our country that are pro-Russian. So is Russia going to support only them? And Ukraine... there is all this history and this mentality. This can't be dragged out any longer because the tension is already turning into hatred. I am hopeful because there is no other way out. But an effort must be made. For example, there are 20,000 active people who want Luhansk and Donetsk to be part of Russia. But look at the problems they are creating. Even if there were 2 million of them. Look what problems they have created for 140 million people in Russia. This is why there are [international] sanctions. Ask anybody -- prices, this, that, the other thing -- everybody is suffering. This is the price for supporting these people? What about the 140 million people? It seems to me they should think more deeply about the future and stop it all.

RFE/RL: There are post-Soviet states where there are no former presidents. In the Central Asia, for instance, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan.

Lucinschi: There are none there.

RFE/RL: And there are no former presidents in Belarus. What would be your advice to the current long-standing leaders who have been in power for 20 years and refuse to leave office, are afraid to leave office, or cannot leave office. Why is it good to be an ex-president?

Lucinschi: There is an answer. Even the ordinary people have an answer. There are big advantages. I don't have to get up according to a schedule. I can say what I think about

anything. I can refuse to see somebody or to visit some place. I can travel wherever I want to. I make fewer mistakes than I did then. There are a lot of advantages.