

CRR - (16)

1

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

"Nearer Abroad"

Moldova's return to the Russian sphere

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

CHISINAU, MOLDOVA -- Vladimir Niku had to go to the bathroom. But where was it? The elderly head of a small, radically anti-communist party had never been in Moldova's parliament building before. He hoped to return in a few days, of course, as a representative. But for now he was just there to meet the westerners who had come to monitor the republic's first elections since it left the Soviet Union.



Vladimir Niku in the hospital

While the observers headed straight for the parliament building's elevator, Niku wandered the darkening halls looking for the men's room. No luck up there on the fifth floor, so Niku headed down one flight of stairs.

No luck there either. Niku found the bathroom all right, but was confronted on his way out by two athletic men dressed in black. Cursing

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him in Russian, the men threw Niku against the wall, pummelled him until he collapsed to the floor, then turned him on his back and brushed switchblades up along his chin, as if shaving off his squarish white beard. "They told me not to leave my house, not to talk on the telephone," Niku recalled from his squalid hospital bed. "They said that I should walk home, that they would follow twenty steps behind me, that I shouldn't call out for help or they would kill me."

As he crossed the parliament building's marble foyer, Niku thought about collapsing in front of the guards at the entrance and begging for their help. "But then I wondered how these men got into the building in the first place," Niku said. Instead, he shuffled out, then on and off the buses home, glancing over his shoulder at each transfer to watch his assailants climb on and off through different doors.

Niku's beating kept him from filling his party's chair at roundtable discussion broadcast that evening on Moldovan state television. Not that it mattered. Since declaring independence from Moscow in 1991, all of Moldova has been so savagely mugged by Russia's military and economic establishment that the dream of Niku's National Christian Party -- eventual reunification with neighboring Romania -- appeared a fading fantasy to most voters. They instead largely cast their ballots, like so many white flags, for the pro-Moscow Agrarian Party.

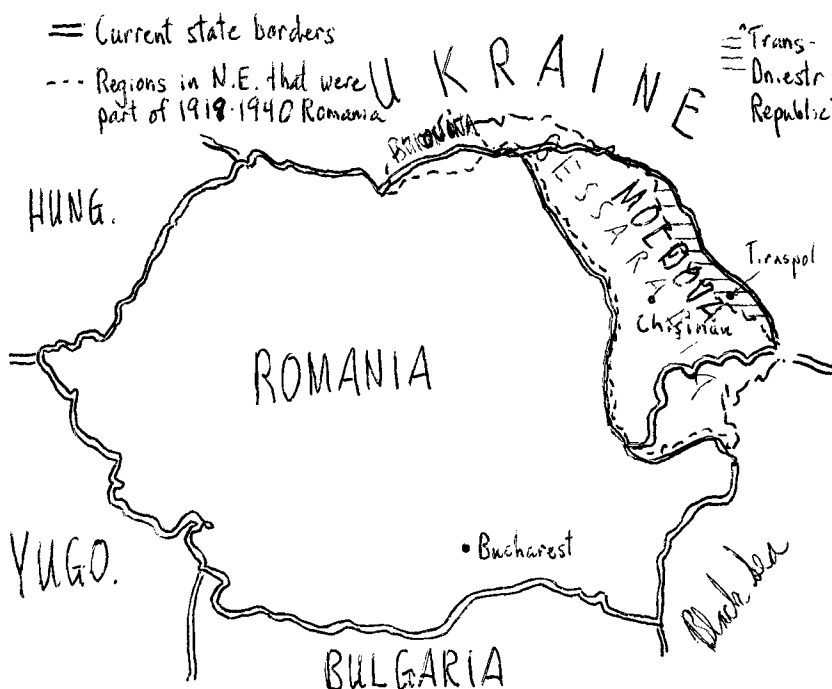
Hard to blame them. Like Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, Moldova disappeared into the Soviet Union when Stalin and Hitler divided Central Europe between them in 1940. It too was subject to brutal Russification; its Latinate language was rewritten in Cyrillic letters to accommodate the colonizing Soviet bureaucrats. But unlike the Baltic republics, Moldova never had a government-in-exile, since most its territory had been part of the Romania at the time of its seizure. So it has never been a fixture in Western minds, a test by which Russian behavior could be measured. It has also been, sadly, too important to Russian strategy for Moscow to let go gracefully. As a bridge to the Balkans and an outpost on the other side of Ukraine, Moldova has, if anything, assumed more strategic importance since the breakup of the USSR.

The messy interethnic tangles of the collapsing Soviet empire invite such despair that some Western leaders breathed an audible sigh of relief when Russia's foreign minister, Andrej Kozyrev, announced that Russia would

assert its interests in "near abroad." Douglas Hurd, Britain's foreign minister, even coauthored an article with Kozyrev on Russia's role as a peacekeeper in its neighborhood. But the fate of people such as Niku, not to mention those killed by the Russian army in Moldova in the 1992 war there, ought to give one pause. Russia's "traditional sphere of interest" might be a nice strategic concept to revisit. But would you want to live there?

The story of Moldova also shows the perils that Russia's policy in 'near abroad' poses for reform in Russia itself and why Russia cannot hope to de-

mocratize unless it sheds its imperial past. Those Moldovans who hope Russia will come to their aid are not merely 'Russians,' but Russian colonists sent from the Soviet Union; many hope Russia will not only restore its influence but the old Soviet structures, such as collective farm networks and military bases, that they know how to run.

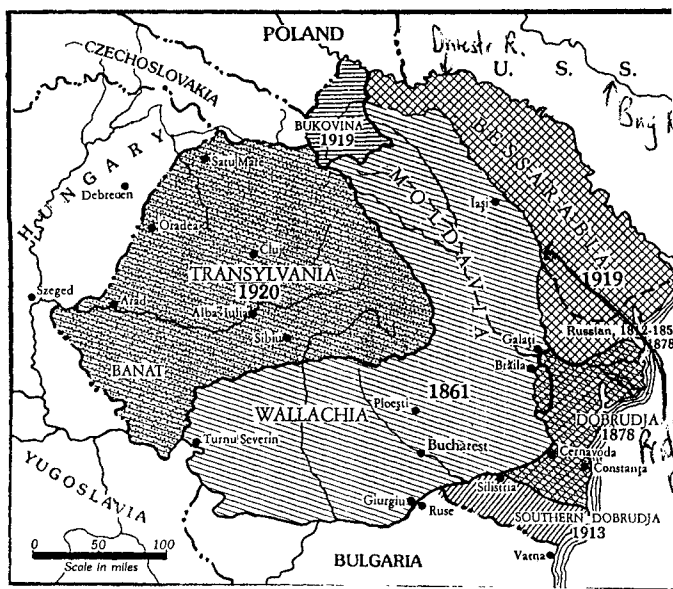


The birth of Transdnistria and Bessarabia

What we know today as "Moldova" sits within the borders it had as a republic of the Russian-led Soviet Union. But it would be a mistake to think that the Russian 14th army now causing such trouble there is merely a leftover of the ex-USSR. Moldova's territory, plus bits to the north and south, has hosted Russian armies since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The two territories that were combined to make up the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic became distinct units as spoils of conquest. They were simply two of territories that czarist Russia managed to annex on its drive southwest, toward the Balkans and the Dardanelles.¹

Contemporary Romania and Moldova approached the end of the eighteenth century as they had begun the sixteenth -- under Ottoman rule. The medieval Romanian state of Stefan the Great (1457-1504) had long since been replaced by Ottoman administrative districts. The southern and western parts of what is now Romania were divided into two provinces; Moldavia, running north along either side of the Pruth River, and Wallachia, stretching west along the southern edge of the Transylvanian mountains. The area between the Bug and Dniester rivers -- the western part of which is now in Moldova, was also Ottoman.

Russia's urge to benefit at the expense of Constantinople gradually changed that. First, Russia pressed southwest to the Dniester River. Then it took control of both Moldavia and Wallachia -- the so-called Danubian Principalities -- after the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812. Only Great Power pressure forced the czar to give up plans to annex both. Instead, Russia accepted the terms of the Treaty of Bucharest (1812) and handed Wallachia and western Moldavia back to Constantinople. But Russia held on to everything east of the Dniester. And it gave that part of Moldavia that lay between the Pruth and Dniester rivers a new name. "Bessarabia," the name the Russians gave their new colony, was born.



The expansion of Romania

Bessarabia as a base for intrigue that backfires

The Treaty of Bucharest did not satisfy Russian ambitions. Rather than merely hold on to Bessarabia, Russia sought to use the new colony as a base for schemes to gain influence further southwest. It wanted a unified but weak Romanian satellite state, one that would allow it to reach deeper into the Balkans in support, for example, of the Serbs and Bulgars. So the czars continued to press for (and continued to win) concessions from Constantinople that would allow it greater influence in the Danubian Principalities. In 1826, the Convention of Akkerman recognized Russia as the provinces' military protector. The "Organic Statutes" of 1831 gained

Russia the right to appoint the province's governors and princes.

Romanians west of the Pruth River at first welcomed Russia's campaign for their "autonomy." But Romanian nationalists, such as the brothers Ion and Dumitru Bratianu, began to fear that Russia was merely usurping the imperial role of the Ottomans and was, indeed, allowing even less autonomy. Russia proved it had little interest in an independent Romanian state in 1848, when it cooperated with Constantinople in crushing a nascent nationalist government based in Bucharest. From then on Romanian nationalists sought the support of Western powers, especially France, in a campaign against both the Russians and the Turks.

Their dream was achieved in 1859, when Russia, defeated in the Crimean War, had to allow the unification of the Danubian Principalities and even the cession of southern Bessarabia. Although Russia kept control of the land east of the Dniester and most of Bessarabia, it could never again wield absolute influence in Bucharest. So the plan changed. Rather than try to control Romania directly, Moscow played on Pan-Slavic sentiment (much of it genuine) to justify support of the emerging Slav states of Bulgaria and Serbia. That way, Russia kept a hand in the Balkans and squeezed Romania (and, for that matter, the Hungarian half of Austro-Hungary) from both sides.

But, as so often in Russian history, the imperial adventure abroad had fatally high costs at home. A.G. Jomini, a friend of the Russian foreign minister wrote to another diplomat to complain of dangers of such a campaign. "Once the gunsmoke and clouds of glory have faded away," he wrote:

the net result will remain; that is to say enormous losses, a deplorable financial situation, and what advantages? Our Slav brothers freed, who will astonish us with their ingratitude.²

But Jomini had written 30 years too early. It was not the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 (so deliciously mocked in *Anna Karenina*) that was to break the czarist state and, by extension, its hold on Bessarabia. Russia's disastrous entrance into the First World War, in part on behalf of the Serbs, ended in the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Romanians in Bessarabia,

left without an administration, formed a Soviet government of their own and hoped for ties to Moscow. But Ukraine's declaration of independence in January 1918 spooked them. Fearing the loss of their northern territories to Ukraine, the Moldovan National Council in Chisinau voted for union with Romania. Romania, having carefully playing both sides during the war, ended it in possession again of Bessarabia.

It was not the place it had been. There were no Romanian schools and no way to organize an administration with the locals. And the ethnic balance had changed. An 1817 Russian census estimated that of Bessarabia's 432,000 residents, 86 percent were Romanian, 6.5 percent Ukrainian and only 1.5 percent were Russian. By 1897, the last census carried out under the czars, Romanians had lost their absolute majority and were down to 47.6 percent, with Ukrainians up to nearly 20 percent and Russians up to 8.6 percent. A century of imperial scheming from the east bank of the River Pruth had so altered the population that, throughout the following century, a resurgent Russia could lay claim to the territory on the grounds that it was protecting its own. One century of imperial ambition had left behind a high-minded excuse for another.

And Moscow kept its hand in the game. Residents of the lands east of the Dniester, the narrow territory Russia had gained at the end of the eighteenth century, had been rebuffed when they had sought unification with Bessarabia. In 1924, after the defeat of Ukraine, a Soviet government based there set up a narrow Moldavian Soviet Socialist Autonomous Republic within Ukraine. They claimed to be the legitimate rulers of Bessarabia.

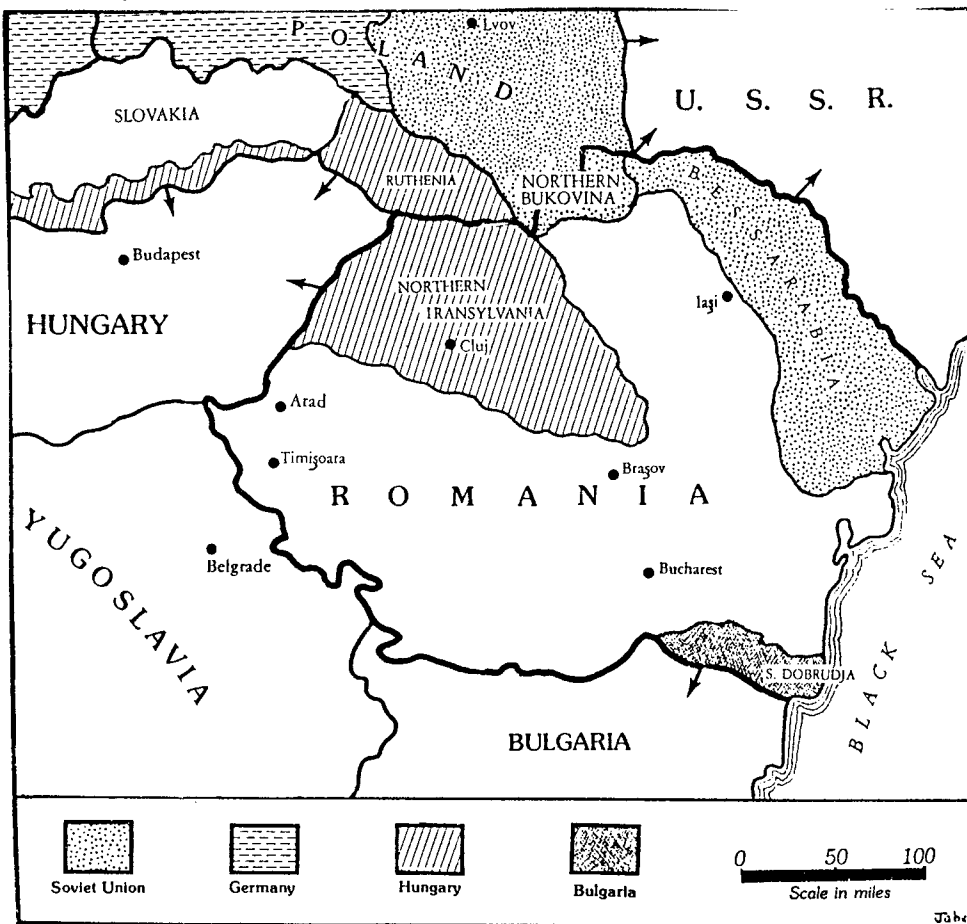
Union until Molotov-Ribbentrop (1918-1940)

Bessarabia's return to Romania was no more flawless than East Germany's recent restoration to Germany. The schoolteachers and administrators sent to the province were often chosen as much for mistakes at home deserving punishment as for merit. But no Moldovan independence movement emerged between the wars.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) called, among so many other things, for Soviet control of Bessarabia, as well as seizure of the northern part of a province, Bukovina, that Romania had gained from the Habsburgs. (Even Ribbentrop objected to the latter demand, pointing out that neither Russia nor Ukraine

had ever controlled the territory.)

In June 1940, when Molotov sent Bucharest two notes demanding the cession of both territories, he claimed to seek both lands out of concern for their ethnic minorities. "With the liberation of Bessarabia from Czarist oppression," he wrote, "the ethnic unity of Bessarabia and Ukraine had been violated; Bessarabia and Bukovina were populated mostly by Ukrainians; the seizure of Northern Bukovina would compensate, at least in part, for the two decades of capitalist Romanian rule over Bessarabia." Although Molotov's ethnic figures were fictitious, the Romanian government, fearing war with the Soviet Union, withdrew from both territories immediately.



The partition of Romania, 1940

Soviet destruction of Romanian control over Bessarabia was far more ruthless than Russian imperialism had been. First, Moscow cut off the northern and southern districts, areas in which the Ukrainian minority was

concentrated, and gave them to the Ukrainian SSR. Second, the Romanian language was rewritten in Cyrillic script (for the first time in two hundred years) and dubbed "Moldavian." The citizens of the republic were listed in censuses as "Moldavians," although their cousins in northern Bukovina were still referred to as Romanians. Third, a program of massive population transfer began. Between 1940 and 1941, 300,000 ethnic Romanians were removed from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Thirteen thousand Soviet administrators and 800 teachers arrived from Moscow.

The wartime authoritarian regime in Bucharest regained control of the seized territories briefly between 1941 and 1944 and even set up its own administration of Transnistria on the lands east of the Dniester River. But Bucharest eventually fell to Soviet invasion. Politicians in Romania proper were allowed nominal and brief autonomy under occupation. In Moldavia, however, the Soviet army set up its own administration, which did not answer to Bucharest. At the war's end, the former Bessarabia was united with the tiny Moldavian autonomous region across the Dniester.

The Russification of the entire territory, begun with the Nazi-Soviet Pact, picked up speed. Three more deportations over the next 20 years sent approximately 1.1 million ethnic Romanians deep into the Soviet Union, often to Siberia. Many Romanians charged with "collaborationism" and "nationalism" were executed. Between 1946 and 1953, a quarter of a million colonists -- Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars -- came to Moldavia to serve as party and state administrators, secret police agents and soldiers. They enforced the collectivization of land, first into *kolkhozes*, nominally independent collective farms, then state-owned *sovkhozes*. With the death of Stalin the flow slowed somewhat but continued.

Divide and rule

As the Soviet Union fell apart, reunification with Romania suddenly looked likely. In August 1989, the Moldavian parliament finally scrapped the Cyrillic letters Stalin had imposed; in the following year it declared Moldova's sovereignty and adopted the Romanian tricolor (with a bull's head added) as the state flag, the Romanian anthem as the state anthem. Moldova refused to join in Gorbachev's referendum in 1991 on holding the USSR together and, in the wake of the attempted coup that August, declared full independence. The first state to recognize Moldova was Romania.

But an awkward historical divide between the lands that had been united in "Moldavia" -- the Trans-Dniester region and the former Bessarabia -- remained. It was aggravated by the fact that the Soviets had concentrated most of the republic's industry in the eastern section and sent proportionally more Russian administrators there to bolster an already higher concentration of Slavs.

The Communist elite was quick to play the "Trans-Dniestrian" card. As early as autumn 1989, the "United Council of Workers' Collectives (or "OTSK"), an organization of Communist managers in the canning and military industries, arranged strikes in protest of the new state language, flag and anthem. Throughout the first half of 1990 the OSTK "gathered support," through dubious referenda and special congresses, for an autonomous republic. The unelected local soviets, roughly the equivalent of town councils, threw in their lot with the separatists.

The new state took shape over the following year. A self-appointed congress gathered in Tiraspol in September 1990 to declare the "Dniester Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic." It held elections, wrought with fraud, in November 1990 for the legislature and December 1991, when Igor Smirnov, a former party secretary in Grigoriopol, became president. Smirnov moved fast to seize control of the judiciary and economy. Chillingly, the separatists also established their own army, the "Dniester Guard."

Even by the low standards of post-Soviet life the new state was bare-knuckled, according to Moldovan authorities. It shut down local newspapers and radio stations and cut off the Moldovan national radio transmitter. The Dniester Guard and other private armies beat up judges and police loyal to Chisinau. It nonetheless had the full support of the 14th Russian army regiments stationed in Tiraspol. In September 1991 its officers began training the Dniester Guard; two months later, its 57th regiment gave the guard 200 machine guns. As minor clashes between the Guard and Moldovan authorities in early 1992 threatened to ignite a larger conflict, the 14th army helped the separatists mine bridges on the Dniester and a hydro-electric plant at Dubusari. The Guard stole huge caches of arms -- 1,000 machine guns in Parcani, 500 aerial bombs in Slobozia -- from willfully inattendant Russian soldiers.³

**Pop: 4.34 million total
(0.6 million in left bank
of Dniester.)**

Roman.: 64.5 %
Ukr.: 13.8
Russ: 13.0
Other: 8.7

Trans-Dniestria also got strong backing from Moscow's red-brown elements (perhaps in thanks for the support the Trans-Dniestrian government had shown for the August 1991 putchists.) In March 1992, while Boris Yeltsin was sticking up for Moldova's unity, the Supreme Soviet backed the separatists. Alexandr Rutskoi visited Tiraspol in April, announcing that he backed Russian intervention "in order to defend conationals in this zone."⁴ Next month a military transport plane brought anti-tank guided missiles from the Russian city of Riazani; civilian aircraft brought radical communists and fascists for a congress held to express support. Gen. Stolearov, deputy commander-in-chief of CIS forces, also visited Tiraspol to declare that the Russian army would never withdraw from a region of such geopolitical significance.

Roman.: 39.9 %
Ukr.: 28.3
Russ.: 25.4
Other: 6.4

Mircea Druc, a former Moldovan prime minister who favors reunification with Romania, told the *East European Reporter* at the time that the conflict in Trans-Dniester was purely political. "This is not an ethnic conflict," Druc said. "This is an attempt to rebuild the Tsarist empire. If we push the Russians out of Trans-Dniestria, they will have gone back 1500-2000 kilometers and 300 hundred years." Like Franco's supporters, Druc said, the people who wanted to restore the Soviet Union were starting in the

provinces, then moving toward the center.⁵

Whether defending its "conationals" or its national interests, the 14th army soon proved up to the fight. In the large-scale fighting that exploded in late May and June 1992, the army backed the separatists with such brutal efficiency that Mircea Snegur, the Moldovan president, quickly acknowledged that the Trans-Dniester Republic would, after all, be granted special status temporarily. Lt. Gen. Alexander Lebed was uncompromising. "The Dniester area is the key to the Balkans," he said. "If Russia withdraws from this little piece of land, it will lose the key and its influence in that region."⁶

The character of the Trans-Dniester Republic: the Tiraspol Six
What sort of regime had Russia given birth to? Just ask the Tiraspol Six.⁷

Just before the war, Trans-Dniestria suffered from a lot of random violence. But while allowing many close to his regime to get off, Smirnov prosecuted six opposition figures vigorously. They were charged with plotting the murders of two key Trans-Dniestrian officials: Nicholay Ostapenko, head of the Slobodozia district's soviet, and Aleksandr Gusar, a recruitment officer for the Dniester Guard. Ostapenko was killed in April 1992, Gusar a month later.

On May 29 Trans-Dniester officials arrested Vladimir Garbuz, a former member of the Moldovan police who joined the Tiraspol branch of the CDPF. Garbuz immediately confessed to acts of murder and terrorism and claimed they had been planned by the CDPF with the help of the Moldovan Ministry of National Security. Garbuz's confession, implicating six other men, was widely publicized at a press conference held on June 1. Defending the innocence of the men Garbuz implicated, the CDPF now argues that Garbuz was an agent who infiltrated the party in order to discredit it.

Following up on Garbuz's confession, Trans-Dniester authorities arrested three more members of the CDPF: Andrei Ivantoc, Alexandru Lesco, and Ilie Ilascu. The last two were especially prominent. In 1989, Lesco helped oppose strikes organized in protest of the change in the official state language. Ilascu was president of the legislative council of the CDPF's Tiraspol branch. The Trans-Dniestrians also prosecuted a prominent former

CDPF member -- Stefan Uritu, dean of Tiraspol's Pedagogical Institute, although they released him three months later. Two men charged were not members of CDPF: Tudor Petrov-Popa and Petru Godiac.

The arrests, investigation and trial have since been sharply criticized by human rights groups. Charges were brought against the men under the Soviet-era criminal code of the Moldavian SSR, discarded in Chisinau but enforced in Tiraspol. Authorities searched their houses without warrants, where they claimed to have found arms, ammunition and uniforms. Two of the defendants -- Ilascu and Uritu -- had great trouble securing a lawyer. Uritu's lawyer saw him for the first time ten days after the arrest and was then immediately called up into the Dniestrian Guard. Ilascu waited nearly three months before he got to see his lawyer.

Meanwhile all of the defendants were beaten and threatened with summary execution unless they confessed. Uritu told *Amnesty International* that he was dragged out of his apartment in his underwear. When he asked to be allowed to dress, Uritu was told he needn't bother, since he would be shot soon. At the police station, Uritu asked to be registered. "Why waste paper?" the officer supposedly told him. "You will be executed tomorrow."

During his detention, Ilascu was told four times that he would soon be shot. He was blindfolded and led outside the prison three times, where shots were fired in the air. Once someone even read a death sentence aloud first.

Conditions at the prison were (and, reportedly, are) miserable and frightening. The detainees were given 25 seconds to get from the cells to the bathroom, after which time dogs were set on them. At least one of the prisoners, Ivantoc, was reportedly told that he was expected to confirm specific events that Garbuz would describe; when he refused, he was beaten. Ivantoc said that before his confession he was beaten so severely that he suffered memory lapses and psychological collapse. He was treated at a psychiatric ward in Ukraine.

The trial itself, which began on 21 April, was held in accord with Soviet-era practice. There was no jury. Of the three presiding judges, only one was professionally trained. The other two were "people's assessors" -- lay judges who, under the Soviet system, were not allowed to sit more often than four weeks every two years. Judgment was by majority vote.

Although the trial was their first hearing, the six were tried by Trans-Dniestria's highest court. There was therefore no court of appeal.

Court sessions were held in the club of the Kirovskaya industrial works in Tiraspol. The defendants sat in two metal cages on the club stage. The hall was packed with up to 500 locals; another 100 gathered outside and listened the proceedings as they were blasted out of loudspeakers. The crowd, according to witnesses, regularly called out slogans such as "Kill the murders!" and booed defendants' statements.



**Four of the "Tiraspol Six" during their trial.
Ilie Ilascu is seated in the center.**

Most relatives of the defendants felt too intimidated to attend the proceedings; only two sisters of Ivantoc tried, but soon left after being threatened by other members of the public. All of the defendant's wives moved to Chisinau during the trial⁸. Their lives in Tiraspol, they said in recent interviews, had become unbearable.

"In July 1992, soldiers came into my apartment with guns," Mrs. Petrov-Popa said in a recent interview. "They asked me lots of questions about my life. One of them grabbed me and said, 'You know everything. You have to tell me everything, or I'll blow your head off.' " Mrs. Lesko said her employer fired her for being "an enemy of the people." She was also kicked out of her apartment.

All of the defendants except Garbuz remained defiant throughout the court proceedings, which continued on-and-off until the end of December. The defendants who proclaimed their innocence shouted back at the crowd, sang Romanian songs during the breaks and refused to acknowledge the authority of the Trans-Dniestrian court. Only Ivantoc was too weak to put up much of a fight; denied a hospital stay for treatment of a liver disorder,

he hobbled on, plagued, he told a team of doctors visiting in mid-August, by dizzy spells, loss of balance and imaginary voices.

On 9 December the court handed down its sentences. Ilascu was given the death penalty and is now being held in solitary confinement in the Grigoriopol district. His only hope of reprieve, even of visits, Uritu recently said, is a course of action he will never take -- an appeal to Smirnov himself.

Ilascu is threatened with death for crimes against the psuedo-state in order to force him to recognize it, Uritu said. His wife may only visit him if he addresses a request to the President of the Trans-Dniester Republic, Smirnov; his death sentence will only be commuted if he requests an appeal to the state's Supreme Soviet. But Uritu doubted that Ilascu, who has already missed one deadline for appeal, would kowtow to a state whose authority he didn't acknowledge. "He would rather die, be shot. He was in prison for two years and has already often been threatened with death."

Pressure on Moldova itself

Moldova is so valuable that even reformers like Yeltsin are not willing to give up their influence there. In June 1993 Yeltsin put Moldova at the top of his list of ex-USSR states in which Russia would seek the right to place troops. When the CSCE offered to negotiate the removal of the 14th army from Moldovan soil, it refused to allow Russia to bring the status of the Trans-Dniester Republic into the talks. So Russia turned the CSCE down, said it would arbitrate, and sent an additional 2,000 peacekeeping troops to the republic. Moscow has also refused to allow an independent investigation of whether the 14th Army sided with the Trans-Dniester authorities during the war.

But where should Russia have its influence -- in a small separate Trans-Dniestria, as it had most recently between 1918 and 1940, or in the whole of the former "Moldavia," cobbled together after the Nazi-Soviet pact and now an independent republic? The latter, bolder venture would have been scuppered if Moldova had joined Romania. But it might be fulfilled if an independent Moldova forms close ties to the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States.

Moldova's politicians are split on the question of joining the CIS.

Anti-communists, tending to favor reunion with Romania, opposed closer ties with what they saw as a Russian empire in new clothes. Politicians who had made their careers in the Communist Party, many of whom have now gravitated to the Agrarian Party, argued that Moldavia's economy was too closely linked to the former USSR to go it alone.

Moldova is definitely economically vulnerable. It imports 99 percent of its energy and 70 percent of its raw materials from the ex-CIS. But it is also provides the CIS with one-third of its fruits and wine. Had it made a go of it unencumbered by Russian interference, it might have, as Estonia has, reoriented its economy.

But Moscow has helped the Agrarians make their point. On 1 August 1993 Russia and several other CIS states imposed excise taxes and customs on goods coming from Moldova. The new taxes crushed its economy by making its fruit and wine too expensive in a zone that had represented 90 percent of its exports. In September, Russia agreed to suspend the taxes if Moldova would join the CIS's economic union. The hardship, one analyst wrote, bolstered support among Moldovans for joining the CIS.⁹

At the same time, Russia has pressured Moldova to give up its sovereignty in foreign affairs. Snegur, the Moldovan president, was once an opponent of a joint CIS foreign policy. But he gave in at the CIS' September 1993 meeting and signed on for the creation of a CIS Council of Foreign Ministers.

Snegur was fought at every turn by the anti-Moscow, pro-Romanian faction in parliament. In frustration, Snegur dissolved parliament in October 1993 and called for new elections to decide Moldova's fate. Would it carry on opposing Russian influence, even at the expense of losing its markets and more trouble in Trans-Dniester? Or would it seek accommodation with Russia?

Although dozens of parties ran, the question of Russia split them neatly into two camps. Leading the campaign against Russian influence was the Popular Front-Christian Democrats. Party chairman Imre Rosca even has a map of interwar Romania hanging on the wall of his office. The Agrarian Party, composed mostly of former communists, favored rebuilding the economic ties Moldova had lost.

Oreal Talmatschi, an Agrarian Party official, said his party was just recognizing reality. "We want to have economic relations with all the world's countries," Talmatschi said. "But the closest relations will always be with the former Soviet republics. We cannot lose that market, because we have no place in the west."

The managers of the collective farms were certainly sympathetic. In Galbena, a wine-producing village, the local vineyard boss had an Agrarian Party poster hanging on his outside wall. He said he favored rebuilding economic links with the states of the former USSR.

"All of the old economic relations have become chaotic," the manager (who did not want to give his full name) said. The village could no longer make fortified wines using Ukrainian vodka, he said. Despite the poor opportunities, workers who had abandoned Galbena for factories in the cities were drifting back. Many would stay with family for a few months, then drift out to other republics, such as Kazakstan, looking for temporary jobs.

But Rosca was dismissive of such claims. "They want to keep good relations with Russia," he said, "because they are the old communist nomenklatura." The party's leader, Petru Lucinschi, was Kremlin chief of ideology at time of the 1991 putsch attempt, Rosca pointed out. In the mid-1970s, during the harshest repression of opposition figures, Lucinschi was third secretary of the Moldovan Communist Party.

"They can't survive without a dictatorship, without collective farms," Rosca said. "They want to keep the centralized economy. They are nostalgics."

The two parties were equally split on the question of Trans-Dniester. Talmatschi said the Popular Front had provoked the separatists. "The threatened reunification with Romania frightened many people on the left bank of the river," he said. "Ordinary people lost their trust in one another." The Agrarians, on the hand, were "centrists" who would solve the problem "through dialogue" and grant the Trans-Dniestrians some sort of special status. When would the 14th Army leave Moldovan soil? Someday, Talmatschi said. The party had not set a date.

Rosca, on the other hand, feared that an Agrarian Party victory would mean a return to Russian military and economic domination. "The socialists

are always talking about how they want to re-establish the Soviet Union. At the same time, they speak very democratically about human rights. But the socialists did a lot to support Trans-Dniestria. They contributed to the strengthening of this illegal republic, but now they pretend that they don't see the crimes taking place there now."

"It's very possible that the 14th army will be legalized and stay there for a long time," he said. "We might even re-establish monetary union (with Russia.) "

Both of the contestants had their unappealing sides. The Agrarians, like many former communists, resembled nothing so much as frogs in a jar of formaldehyde, embalmed after years of bureaucratic resistance to the simplest request. And Lucinschi's pre-1990 record wasn't much to stand on.

But the Moldovans who favor reunification with Romania were equally hobbled by one awkward fact -- it was a pet project of the Romanian dictator and Soviet enemy Nicholae Ceausescu. With his regime in tatters, his surviving acolytes have cloaked their pasts in a new fervent nationalism. Perhaps the most grotesque example, the obese and anti-semitic poet Adrian Paunescu, packed a stalinist Hall of Culture in Chisinau on the eve of the elections. "Poor Romania, poor Romania, martyr of the Hungarians, martyr of the bolsheviks." Victim too, apparently, of reform. "So many parties, the prices are so high," Paunescu moaned. "Beware, Romania, beware the bolsheviks in new face-masks of wire."



Paunescu (second from left) in Chisinau

The February 1994 elections: back into the fold

Snegur threw his weight behind the Agrarians. The night before the election, he spent an hour on live television boosting the left-oriented parties. And both he and the Agrarians used their own weight within the post-communist state.

The week before Moldovans went to the poll, Snegur issued decrees changing the voting requirements. Now anyone born in Moldova could vote, whether or not he was a citizen. At the last minute Snegur also opened polling stations for the Trans-Dniestrans and Gagouz. That, said Valeriu Gorea, an electoral commissioner in Chisinau, would allow the Russians sympathizers in Trans-Dniestria and outside Moldova to vote. They would not fear defying Smirnov's ban on voting, he said, while ethnic Romanians might be intimidated. On the day of the poll, in fact, Russian army officers patrolled buses heading from Trans-Dniestria and took down names.

"Problems in those regions didn't appear a week ago," Rosca said. "If (Snegur) is preoccupied with the rights of these people, why didn't he include these decrees in the original law? Then we would have had time to check for fraud."

Not that the Agrarians needed much help. "They have other ways to influence voters," Gheorghe Tsibuliac, a leader of the smaller anti-communist Democratic Party, said. "They just fix up a meeting with the president of the collective farm."

The slow pace of privatization has left a pyramid of statist power intact. At the bottom are the farmers. True, some have received private plots of land. But since land cannot be bought or sold, even a farmer who has received a plot must cooperate with his neighbors. That cooperation is still orchestrated by the communist-controlled companies that grabbed control of the farming equipment. And they are still beholden to bureaucrats in the Agrarian Party.

Talmatschi denied that the Agrarian Party had used its influence in the state-owned farms or in the companies that control the equipment. "We have members of the party who are presidents of collective farms," he said. "But we didn't work through that administrative system."

Out in the countryside, people told a different story. Voters gathered outside a polling station in Bozieni, a village near Hincesti, complained that Petru Ciubuc, the director of the local state-owned farm, had thrown his weight behind the Agrarians.

On Feb. 21, villagers said, Ciubuc told mid-level managers to ensure that their employees attended a rally of the Agrarians on the following day. Workers were given a paid holiday but were explicitly instructed to attend the rally.

"The other parties have no such advantage because they don't have these connections to the leaders (of state-owned industry)," one villager complained. But he said that he understood why the managers helped the Agrarians. "Even if the manager of a farm doesn't like the party," he said, "he cannot say it because he is afraid. They (the managers) need seed, they need petrol, equipment -- all that comes through them (the Agrarian Party.) If some of the managers want to export their wine, they get the export license through the Agrarians."

In exchange for bureaucratic favors, collective farm managers also gave the Agrarians free run with their cars and gasoline for the campaign, according to Rosca. "This in a country where a pregnant woman has to have 10 liters on hand all the time so she can refill the ambulance taking her to the hospital," Rosca sighed.

As an election observer I saw other problems. Ballots were not numbered. In Hincesti, I asked to see the stored ballot papers; when there seemed to be far more on the books than in the safe, I insisted that the electoral commission count the votes already cast. As the clerks ticked off their sheets, the vice president of the electoral commission came downstairs with three hundred ballot papers he had forgotten to show us.

But in the end the Agrarian Party victory was so overwhelming -- 45 percent of the vote -- that it could not merely be attributed to fraud and intimidation. Something had obviously gone badly wrong in Moldova since it had tried to leave the Russian sphere. So Moldova surrendered.

Clamping down on Trans-Dniester

With Chisinau on its way back into the Russian fold, the 14th army began cracking down on the Trans-Dniestrian separatists. Why settle for control

of a narrow strip of land when you could bring the whole republic under your influence? And maybe even receive western kudos for serving a peacekeeping role?

Col. Michial Bergman runs Tiraspol from an office stacked with machine guns and cannisters of tear gas. Leftovers from the 1992 war, I wondered, or weapons in Bergman's new campaign against Trans-Dniestria's mafia and, by extension, its government?

Bergman immediately made it clear that the prime target of his clean-up operation was the Trans-Dniestrian government itself. Gone were the days when a Trans-Dniestrian 'Women's Strike Committee' could 'steal' 20,000



guns from the 14th army (although Bergman retold this improbable story with a straight face.) Now, he complained, it was impossible to distinguish between Trans-Dniestria's government and its mafia. "Everything that is being produced here," he said, "is being taken out, the money is stored in foreign banks, witnesses are killed, deputies frightened and the ministers who bear responsibility (for law and order) are criminals themselves."

Trans-Dniestrian officials were interfering with his crackdown on mafia gangs, Bergman said. The week before he had arrested 1,500 people involved in 216 different gangs, he said, only to

watch the Trans-Dniester prosecutor-general return home early from vacation to release them.

Bergman also attacked the organization that had launched Trans-Dniestria's independence movement, the OSTK or "United Council of the Workers' Collectives," "Here," he said, "we call them the 'United Council of Creative

Corruption.' " Bergman was especially hard on Alexander Jureskov, the supreme soviet's deputy in charge of law enforcement, who Bergman said was running his own gasoline monopoly.

"The leadership has lost control of this republic," Bergman said. "In fact, the underworld controls it. The leadership has lost the upper hand."

A battle that pitted communist separatists and their affiliated mafiosi against the Russian 14th Army sounded like a good one to sit out. But for better or for worse our delegation of election observers quickly became a bone of contention between the two sides. Col. Bergman had made it clear that Smirnov was yesterday's man. But, as we were soon to discover, that didn't mean the president's minions were going to give up their "country" without a fight.

We packed into our Ladas and, heading north across the brown fields, tried out theories on one another. Who was in Moscow that Bergman thought was unhappy with him? The Zhirinovsky crowd? Yeltsin's besieged reformers? We stopped for pictures of statue of Lenin, braced, as usual, with his chin held high as if braving an opposing wind. Without stopping we snapped shots of an early-warning radar complex, not, presumably, installed by or for the defense of the Trans-Dniester Republic.



We had hoped to reach the republic's northern tip in time to return for our early evening meeting with Lebed, but there seemed no harm in stopping off in a Romanian village along the way. When we pulled into Malaesti most of the village's families were gathered at their gates to watch a wedding procession.

Most were happy to chat. Did they plan to vote on the following day? "We would like to," one resident said, "because we want Moldova to stay in one piece. But it's very far to the polls and we don't have any way of getting there."

"How is life here?" I asked. "Are you happy getting your wages in Trans-Dniester roubles?"

A road construction worker scoffed. "I get 100,000 roubles a month," he said. "Ten eggs costs 10,000 roubles. You should send an American here to run this country. Snegur and those folks are all Communists."

One family invited us in for lunch. Their eldest daughter was a nurse, her husband a doctor, so the four-room, one-story house had rewards, such as a 1991 German shopping guide, of prosperity. Over homemade apple wine and stuffed peppers the grandfather of the house worried about the return of the communists. He cuddled and kissed his grandson and complained that Smirnov had forced schools under his control to return to the Cyrillic alphabet.

Pleasant as the diversion had been, it was time to head on. Or so we thought. Fifty feet down the road from the family who had entertained us we were stopped by a waiting roadblock. Not a good sign. As Moldova split, police stations fought running battles with one another; some took orders from Chisinau, some from Tiraspol. But two years on the whole apparatus of the state was firmly in Smirnov's hands. We were told to follow the police to Grigoriopol, the district capital, where our documents would be reviewed.

This time back in the car our conspiracy theories were more local. Had someone seen us leaving Bergman's office? As we drove on, we realized just how many of the cars on the road were police vehicles in disguise. A blue Lada with a conspicuously large antenna approached us, pulled up off a dusty side road. The police stopped us, followed the Lada, then, after a few gunshots, both cars returned and disgorged their occupants, who conferred.

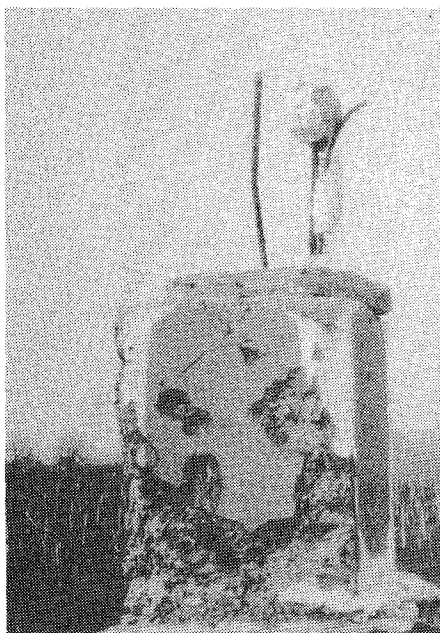
The meeting broke up and we were led on. A car without license plates and a cracked windshield sped past us.

"The police don't seem to worried about them," I said. A few minutes after we stopped outside headquarters, the car we had just seen also pulled up for a conference. A van without plates drove by; the driver waved to the cops. Who were conferring.

Conferring makes it all sound a bit official; in fact, the collected undercover security force of Grigoriopol, both inside and outside the station, seemed to

spend most of its time either barking on telephones, documents in hand, or playing with cheesy electronic toys. One played "Jingle Bells" -- appropriate, I thought, for a town so decked out in red stars that it appeared to celebrate Christmas year-round.

We are election observers, we protested. That got no response. We've just come from seeing Col. Bergman. Again, nothing. Instead, the police led us on again, further up the road, and showed us some war damage, places



where they had fought. But when we tried to cross a checkpoint to head further north, the guard told us he had instructions from the security ministry not to let us through. Well, fine -- back to Tiraspol to see Lebed. No, first back to the police station in Grigoriopol.

Once the sharp-nosed, dull-eyed lieutenant had handed our drivers' papers back we asked what we were being detained for. No response.

"Well, if we're not being detained for anything, we're leaving," another delegate said. We pulled out, again accompanied by the police, for the trip back to Tiraspol. When

the police pulled us over once more, some delegates' tempers boiled over.

Not to worry. Matter solved. Another police car pulled over and a senior security ministry officer got out. "You're being expelled," he said firmly. A van full of soldiers pulled up behind him.

"Look, we have to be in Tiraspol in half an hour to see General Lebed," one delegate complained. The sun had already slipped behind a bank of clouds along the horizon. The security man plainly couldn't care less that Lebed was expecting us. One wave of his hand as he flipped open his car door and the police were screeching into a 180 and flashing their lights. The soldiers piled back into their olive green van and we were hustled out of Trans-Dniester.

Back in Chisinau, we called Gen. Lebed's office to apologize and complained that we had been detained by the Trans-Dniestrian authorities. The

general's press officer, interested in but clearly angered by our story, arranged for Lebed to reassert his authority. On the Monday after the vote an army car met our delegation's representatives and escorted them back to Tiraspol.

Lebed, an imposing man with a broken nose and tough bark, made it clear that Smirnov's days were numbered. Although he had backed the separatists against Snegur's government, he said he thought the new people in Chisinau, especially Lucinschi, were politicians with whom he could do business.

If Smirnov was on his way out and the Trans-Dniestrian Republic was being wrapped up, were the wives of the Tiraspol Six encouraged? They had always honored their husbands' desire that they not deal with Smirnov. Did they expect better treatment from a reunified Moldova?

Perhaps, they said, although they feared that a reprieve would not come in time. All had seen their husbands since sentencing. Poor food and grim prospects, the wives said, were destroying the prisoners. They worried that time was running out.

Mrs. Ilascu, whose husband faces the death sentence, was desperate. Ilascu final grace period, according to his prosecutor, is up on 9 May. In the meantime, Tiraspol is swirling with rumors that the 25 most efficient workers will be allowed to compete on the firing range for the right to shoot him. Mrs. Ilascu also wanted to convince her husband to stop a hunger strike he had reportedly begun on Feb. 8. Her last visit, on January 5, had given her enough reason to be worried about his mental and physical health.



**Four of the prisoners' wives: (left to right)
Lesco, Petrov-Popa, Ivantoc, Ilascu**

"They keep him alone in a small cell," she said. "He's not allowed to speak to anyone, even the guards. The food is terrible, and I am only allowed to bring him eight kilos of food a month. His only source of information is (Trans-Dniestrian) state television and radio news, and they just broadcast statements from all the organizations that want to see his sentence carried out. It makes him feel terrible."

Her only hope, she said, was that the electoral victory in Moldova of forces close to Russia would mean the end of a game in which her husband was trapped. "There's probably some political arrangement behind this," she said. "The authorities from Tiraspol want to gain something at the expense of the prisoners."

Uritu, a former prisoner of Smirnov himself, said he thought Ilascu stood a chance, since his use was already spent. "During the election campaign, this case was used against the unionists by those who are oriented toward Moscow," he said. "With the Ilascu case, they debilitated the anti-Snegur group, those anti-Communists who favor reunion with Romania. If the democratic forces prevail in Russia, he won't be shot."

The wives, less optimistic, also said they also thought that Russia was the ultimate court of appeal. They had written to Yeltsin's office. "Although these republics say they are independent," Mrs. Ilascu said, "everything still depends on the center. We had hoped the democratic forces could do something for our husbands." But all of the wives said they were horrified to see the leaders of the October coup attempt, men who had backed up Smirnov, released while their husbands remained behind bars.

The prospect of the 14th Army prevailing over Smirnov offered little solace. "For months before the trial," Mrs. Lesko said, "they were under Bergman's control. They were kept at the commandant's station. That's where the worst tortures were. And Bergman was a witness at the trial. He denied everything our husbands said."

Whatever the character of new regime in Chisinau, most of the opposition figures said they thought Moldova would now remain united and that the great differences in political freedoms between the Dniester's two banks would even out. "The situation will improve in Trans-Dniestria," Uritu said, "but will get worse on the right bank."

Rosca agreed. "Basically, the regime from Tiraspol moved here."

Small comfort to those who had suffered for opposing the return to the Russian sphere. Like Vladimir Niku. Or like another man I visited in hospital the day after the election.

Valeriu Saharneanu was attacked by unknown assailants in the entrance hall to his apartment block on the evening of Feb. 23, four days before the elections. He was hospitalized the following day with contusions and a concussion. He told me that he had reason to believe the attack was politically motivated.

Saharneanu has been active in anti-communist circles since 1970, when he and the future founders of the Popular Front formed a discussion group at Chisinau University. After the relative success of the Popular Front in elections in 1990, Saharneanu was appointed director of news at state television. There he frequently clashed with the general director of state television and radio, Adrian Ousati, whom Saharneanu accused of being close to the former Communists in the Agrarian Party.

In the run-up to the elections, the conflict between Ousati and Saharneanu grew more intense. Ousati, Saharneanu said, asked him to broadcast Agrarian Party electoral spots more frequently than those of other parties. Saharneanu refused.

On the evening of February 23, Saharneanu and some of his friends visited two Romanian journalists in their room at the Hotel Dacia. Well after midnight, Saharneanu walked home, accompanied by his friends until the last two blocks. "It's not the first time I've come home late," he said later. "I wasn't afraid."

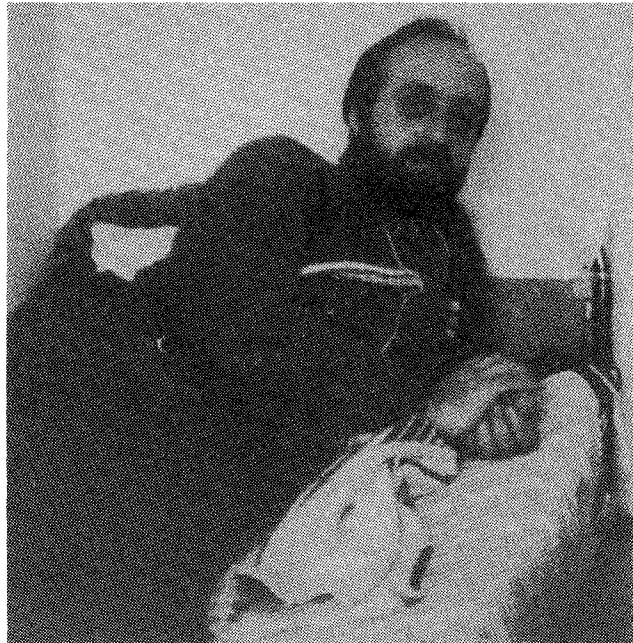
Saharneanu entered the building's hallway, which was unlit. While reaching for the lights he was struck on the nape of the neck. He collapsed and felt several kicks to his stomach before losing consciousness. Waking up half an hour later, he crawled to the building's elevator, then into his apartment, where his wife helped him to bed and nursed him.

Saharneanu suspects that Ousati was involved in the attack because he seemed to know of it, despite Saharneanu's decision at first not to tell anyone but his wife and a friend, a doctor. At 11 a.m. the following

morning, Saharneanu asked his wife to call his office and report him ill. Talking to colleagues later, Saharneanu discovered that Ousati had made sarcastic comments about the attack on Saharneanu before his wife had called in.

"I think they (the Agrarian Party) were afraid in the last days of the campaign, especially of the parties in the opposition," Saharneanu said.

"Some parties said they would deliver some 'bombs' (i.e. revelations about Agrarian Party corruption) just before the vote. Probably they were afraid of that and of me broadcasting it." Saharneanu said he trusted the two deputies who took over in his absence but feared neither would have had the courage to broadcast any material Ousati explicitly forbid.



Valeriu Saharneanu in the hospital

Even if the government of Trans-Dniestria closes, it will have left its scars, physical and psychological, as well as a legacy of mistrust of the CIS and the way in which Russia pursues its interest in 'near abroad.' Uritu, the former prisoner in Tiraspol, said he was resigned to Russian domination, even if he didn't understand it.

"After having meetings in Moscow and Tiraspol, I can feel the interests of Russia here -- first of all militarily," Uritu said. "But it is strange to me that Russians are ready to suffer hunger just to dominate other territories. I don't see the point."

Mrs. Lesko, wife of one of the men still imprisoned, was as confused, although not as composed.

"It's a terrible period," she said. "We are living through history, but there is a lot of blood."

Yours,



Chandler

Footnotes

1. My thanks to Prof. Dr. Ioan Chiper of Bucharest's N. Iorga Institute of History for the evening he spent discussing Bessarabia with me.

2. Jelavich, Barbara. History of the Balkans, vol. 1 (18th and 19th centuries) (Cambridge, CUP). p. 378-9.

3. These details come from the post-Soviet Moldovan government's own guide to its republic (Chisinau, 1992) and therefore should be treated with the same caution one would bring to any official description of such controversial events.

4. *ibid.*

5. Interview with Mircea Druc, *East European Reporter*, Vol. 5, no. 4 July-August 1992, p. 42.

6. Socor, Vladimir. "Russia's Army in Moldova: There to Stay," in RFE/RL Research Report, vol. 2, no. 25, June 18, 1993

7. The details of the arrest and trial of the Tiraspol Six are taken from *Amnesty International's* report *Moldova: the Trial of the Tiraspol Six*. AI, London, Oct. 1993.

8. The wives were resettled in flats donated by the Moldovan authorities a year later. But the donation of the flats itself gives some indication of how the wives have been treated. "I saw the mayor of Chisinau on T.V. saying that he had given the wives of the Tiraspol Five apartments," Mrs. Lesko said. "But we hadn't been given anything. So when we complained, they did give us a place to stay." All of the wives said they had received far more help from the Romanian authorities than from the Moldovan ones. "When we went to see Snegur," Mrs. Ilascu said, "we were told they were doing everything they could. But we have already been waiting for two years." "Our own authorities practically forget us," Mrs. Lesko said.

9. Socor, Vladimir. "Isolated Moldova being pulled into Russian Orbit," RFE/RL Research Reports, vol. 2, no. 50, 17 December 1993, p. 14.