

Georgia, Moldova and Bulgaria: Dismantling Communist Structures Is Hardly Extremism

INTERVIEW WITH IRINA SARISHVILI-CHANTURIA, IURIE ROȘCA,
AND PHILIP DIMITROV

The three east European leaders and activists interviewed here have coped with an unusual amount of difficulties in attempting to reform their respective countries. Their quest to create democracy and economic reforms met with many obstacles, some of which proved insurmountable. Sarishvili-Chanturia briefly served as deputy prime minister in 1992–93, but resigned to protest President Eduard Shevardnadze’s accession to Russian pressures to join the Commonwealth of Independent States. She survived an assassination attempt in 1994 but her husband, the late dissident and democracy activist Gia Chanturia, did not. She was head of the National Democratic Party of Georgia. Roșca, who was one of the main leaders of Moldova’s independence drive in 1989–91, is the chairman of the main non-communist party in Moldova, the Christian Democratic People’s Party. He has led numerous civil resistance campaigns against the illiberal policies of the communist government since early 2001. Dimitrov, who served as Bulgaria’s prime minister in 1992–93 and later as ambassador to the United States, is widely recognized as one of the few stabilizing forces in the Balkans during the beginning of the turmoil there. Dimitrov witnessed the return of his Union of Democratic Forces to power in 1996 and 1997, and actively participated in the quick turnaround that Bulgaria has witnessed since then, with invitations to join NATO and the European Union. In this interview, the three leaders speak about what could have been done better, lustration, the role of the West, Russian interference, and corruption, among other topics. The interview took place in Mexico City—where they attended the international congress of the Christian Democratic parties—by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King on November 23, 2001. Transcribing and translation assistance provided by Sofia Kasmeridi.

Demokratizatsiya: If you could start the whole process again in your countries, what would you do differently?

Sarishvili-Chanturia: Generally speaking, I can say that I would pay more attention to economics, which, at the beginning of the national revival, was absent whatsoever—to my mind, everywhere. Actually, this was an unavoidable mistake, because it was impossible to do everything at once. We did not have enough professionals of various fields and specialists in certain disciplines to support us back then. We were represented only by youth and dissidents. We had no economic experience, no specific training or education, no enlightenment, I would say. Therefore, it was an unavoidable mistake. If I could return back to that time with my present experience I would change it; but if I find myself in the same position as I was fifteen years ago, I would not be able to do anything even though I want it very much. And this happened because the intelligentsia joined us, let's say, when it became fashionable to do so, but not before that.

Rošca: What would I do? I guess all post-Soviet countries have an identical experience. As it is known, dissidents started all this, then writers and creative intelligentsia joined us. Most of them, with very few exceptions, were what can be called *arrivistes*. I think if I had to return back, I would start an open confrontation with former Soviet intelligentsia, who had actually hijacked perestroika earlier. I think that we, and not only in Moldova, were a bit late with forming serious political structures. For example, the formation of political parties, let's say, had always remained as a second priority and there were general democratic debates. But I think it was an unavoidable mistake of our youth because we did not graduate from special colleges. We all are, so to speak, self-taught, self-educated people. Naturally, I agree with our colleague, that more attention should have been paid to economics. Unfortunately we had no experience and while we were busy solving political, national, and cultural problems the criminal structures occupied themselves with economics.

Demokratizacija: There were a few governments who also had only dissidents. For example, Mart Laar in Estonia. Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia said a famous phrase, that he prefers temporary inexperience to permanent sabotage. However, why did this idea work in the governments of Czechoslovakia and Estonia? They got rid of much of the old bureaucracy and police structures. They got rid of the model of Soviet economics. They were able to develop a new economic model quite rapidly.

Sarishvili-Chanturia: They were much more independent than we were. Even if you compare us with the Baltic republics, we were in a worse situation. Everything depended on the degree of independence we had. They did not have a problem, as I mentioned during my speech yesterday. They were not a part of one population without its own face. We were called "Soviet people," but the Baltic republics were not. The Baltics have always been considered something higher, because they were not recognized as a Soviet identity.

Demokratizatsiya: Let's talk about lustration, since more and more it is being touted as the most necessary reform, in retrospect.

Rošca: Why is lustration law important to us? I know why it did not pass in Moldova, though we have been pushing it insistently for ten to eleven years by now. It is important not because we want revenge against somebody, no. It is important because without it one cannot hope that power in the country will eventually belong to the people who are independent in their political decisions. This is the most important—that these people are independent. The reason for it is because there are two types of dependency: they can be dependent on former KGB structures or on mafia groups. In our case, sometimes we have a mixture of both, like a cocktail. Lustration law is very important to us and according to the reaction on this law or even on this proposal it is possible to tell the true intentions and real face of a political leader and/or a political party. Of course, we have studied the Czech, Polish, and Romanian experiences. Although I would say that Romania had initially a very good idea, but they have taken all the spice out of it and right now Romanian laws are not very good. In our country, we could not do it during four parliaments in a row, though the communists have now a majority in the parliament for the first time. And the leftist Agrarian Party had the power in 1994–98. Unfortunately, we did not succeed. Then we also thought to introduce limitations for former officers and agents of secret services regarding their access to positions of power. We wanted to change the electoral code with the same idea in mind: To let them have a break for several years. Unluckily, we could not do it. Our opponents usually tell us, “Why do you need this? This is revenge. This is vendetta. We have to try to obtain national peace, etc.” But we were not going to put anybody in jail; we just wanted to limit their access to power. It was important to us. On the other hand, I think, this law had a great political effect in Moldova. This proposal, I mean, because intelligentsia, especially, and youth, who are very sensitive to these issues, could see who is who. And actually, those parties who did not support our proposal are the non-parliamentary parties today. They are outside the parliament not only for this reason, of course. Another example is the following: we denounced the documents on the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991—we offered to do it by means of law. To refuse the CIS in order to join the European Union. One cannot be here and there at the same time. And again, the parliamentary parties were against our offer. As well as against the lustration law and the bill denouncing the core acts of the CIS. And this actually has demonstrated to us that other parliamentary parties get their orders from the Russian embassy and from the Russian secret services.

Sarishvili-Chanturia: Our situation is a bit more complicated, because. . . have you heard of Zviad Gamsakhurdia?

Demokratizatsiya: Of course!

Sarishvili-Chanturia: Before he came to power, he and the communists had

made up a whole scene. They say that Gamsakhurdia and his supporters attacked the KGB building; they broke into the building and took the documents from that place. Nobody knows which documents were taken out, where these documents were taken to, and whether anything was there at all. As of today, official sources say and the official version is: there is no official data in our KGB. This means that I am personally “for” passing a lustration law, but how is it going to be handled and which commission or group will define who is more important? Maybe somebody will be blackmailed. What if somebody has never been a KGB agent? And there are no documents to prove anything. Maybe the documents exist and the authorities just lie. Nobody knows. There was a fact of a break-in and somebody took something out. Whether something was taken, there is no evidence, they have only one justification, i.e., that nothing can be checked and verified. And the originals of these documents are only in Moscow. This is the case. I have no doubt that we also have these documents. They could not take everything. Nobody would ever give them everything in the first place. Maybe it was burnt, maybe it is still kept, but what is the difference? Officially, the documents do not exist any more. Therefore it is a complicated issue.

Rošca: I offered a method in order to find out who was an agent among us—let’s call “us” the political elite. Let me go off on a tangent a bit here. I have heard, although I do not believe, that in Moldova in 1991 during the events in August of 1991—the putsch—all the documents were taken away partly to Tiraspol, which was totally controlled by separatists, partly to Moscow, and the rest somewhere else, nobody knows where. But we still need the law. All the time people blame the politicians and try to find out who was a KGB agent. This happened last year in our former parliament. One of our deputies came to the microphone and said, “Dear Sirs. I want to make a statement that I have never been an agent of the secret services of the USSR or Russian Federation and please trust my word.” I do not know why he did this; it was a short time before elections, so I assume this was the reason. I offered that such declarations must be made not in front of the microphone but on a polygraph machine. Law enforcement agencies have such a possibility to attach to a person different wires. Is that right and just medically?

Sarishvili-Chanturia: Do you really believe in this?

Rošca: Well, of course not, it was a pre-elections joke, to see their reaction—who lies and who does not—the machine will show everything.

Sarishvili-Chanturia: If I want to lie I will do it in such a way that not a single machine will detect me.

Rošca: By the way, speaking of these machines. American secret services—no, it was police, actually—have come to the following conclusion: *Homo Sovieticus* does not react to polygraph machines. About eight to ten years ago I read

an article from the American media, when FBI was fighting Russian mafia and they caught Russians and tested them on polygraph machines. They found out that polygraphs did not detect these people lying. For the Russians, lies are their normal condition—not even a slight internal excitement happens. Do you understand?

Demokratizatsiya: Yes, this is very interesting.

Rošca: This is not a joke. When a communist lies, he feels wonderful. But I am sorry, I have deviated from our conversation.

Dimitrov: I think there is another aspect to this. The lustration law by definition is a way to morally castigate and denounce people. In other words, it serves to a large extent the necessity of the nation to have a moral direction and to establish values. Wherever it was not done it kind of retained for communism and KGB agents the possibility to claim that it was all okay. I naturally agree with everything that has been said up to now. The point is that if you don't do it early enough, it does not work very well.

Demokratizatsiya: That's true.

Dimitrov: I mean, ten years later it's kind of peculiar to claim that you will put a quarantine on people who for ten years have been taking prominent positions in politics, as far as the communist element is concerned. I mean lustration for former communists and high-ranking activists. It probably makes some sense still, concerning the former KGB agents, though my bitter experience tells me that there comes a point when nobody really cares. This is what we have seen when we opened the secret police files in a kind of very ambiguous way, but still some of them were opened back in 1997. It probably had some effect. When it came to the elections of 2001 there was a possibility for the parties to ask for data whether their candidates have secret police files or not and some parties would not permit such guys in their lists of candidates. But when it came down to it, practically nobody really cared. So this is a sad reality, but it's reality. As far as lustration law is concerned, I definitely recommend the Czech way—opening the secret police files and putting quarantine period on those former secret police agents and prominent communist leaders.

Demokratizatsiya: When you think of an ideal transition—for example, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Estonia—what is your, let's say, favorite model? If Georgia, Moldova, or Bulgaria could follow somebody's example, which example would you choose? Or would it obviously be the Ukrainian model? [laughter from all]

Sarishvili-Chanturia: It is very difficult to answer. Czechoslovakia was lucky with its internal problems. They came to a mutual agreement not to fight each

other and get separated peacefully, which ended up with the kind of a country we see right now. It is very difficult to say because, speaking of relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia, this would be an impossible way to resolve a problem. Our desire to live separately was not mutual.

Demokratizatsiya: You had a Kitovani and a Ioseliani.

Sarishvili-Chanturia: Well, Kitovani and Ioseliani have nothing to do with Abkhazian conflict. But it's difficult to answer.

Dimitrov: I had a great desire to emulate the Hungarian experience, and I even tried to do it, but, I had to deal with different communists, in the first place, and secondly, we are located on the other end of Yugoslavia. Not a single investment came.

Rošca: I would remember that geography shapes and conditions politics and makes history, and speaking seriously, whether we could take some country's model—Czech, Polish, or Hungarian. I think we would have to take something from Bulgarian experience, when we start sinking. From my point of view, we had too much hope in ourselves, our own skills and power. We had no skills to work with Western creditors, who often helped us in that sense when we did not have majority in the parliament. In order to promote laws to liberalize economics and privatization we were helped by the IMF in the first place, of course. But I think we should have insisted they were more attentive to our proposals. I do not mean the government, but because our country never had a majority parliament, where we had many factions. I think Western creditors who gave us big credits could nicely, elegantly, and delicately help us get out of that situation. But I think they help today, too.

Let's say, we have problems. I do not know much about others, we have always had a problem with freedom of speech. Today we also publish things almost in *samizdat* form. There is a total control over television. It actually does not exist. There is only one TV station that covers events. This is a different question and it regards a possibility to go through this crazy period. We have just one TV station that covers the whole country and this is a state-owned TV station. It is totally controlled by the authorities and actually deforms everything, even what is going on in the parliament.

Returning to your question, I personally do not think that it is possible to take a certain model and try to copy it into a former Soviet republic. I believe there are always many possibilities to comment on the fact why we could not do something. Certainly we could have done much more. But probably these ten years that have passed since declaring independence are only starting to form a new political class. Most of us were amateurs and are still amateurs, and very few real specialists choose politics as their career. Now the perception of state activity is changing somehow. Young people, who have a different education and a different outlook, come into politics. To my mind, Moldova is in a very interesting

position right now. If nothing extraordinary happens—and I do not think it should happen—after the communist regime, which will last for at least three more years, quite mature reformers can actually take power, who will be able to catch up with the lost decade somehow.

Demokratizatsiya: Sometimes, when most of the people think that it is too late, the opposite happens. For example, after Zhan Videnov in Bulgaria, the new government of Ivan Kostov pursued some very strong reforms, and growth returned, after an economic meltdown provoked by the Videnov government. Nobody thought that the PRI here in Mexico could lose. My new question is, did the role of the West help or not really? Or did it achieve the opposite?

Sarishvili-Chanturia: West did help, but we had a bigger impression of this help than it was in reality. In any case, during the time of dissidence we relied on the help from the West much more than we should have expected it in reality from them. Mostly it was moral support, and even in that case, we were not so practical back then and did not see everything in such a pragmatic way. We thought and we truly believed that for all our heroic fights and all that comes with it, the West would get very excited and will support us in every way, would help us go against Russia and against occupation and everything that goes with it. But it turned out that their values are not only moral and they rely not only on moral principles. I do not mean to say they are immoral.

Rošca: Pragmatic.

Sarishvili-Chanturia: In any case—very pragmatic and I would say too pragmatic. Sometimes our countries ended up being victims and pawns of some political auctions. Very often.

Dimitrov: It seems a bit more complicated to me. First of all, it is absolutely true that the West was as ignorant of what to do as we ourselves. And to be very frank, there were quite a number of perfectly wrong suggestions and ideas on how this transformation could be effected. So in quite a number of cases they were *bona fide* thinking that they were proposing the best solution and it was absolutely irrelevant. Then the second thing is that they kind of looked at our countries as places where they were sharing, to a large extent, their knowledge and experience in a democratic situation and they *bona fide* believed that the fall of Berlin Wall was the achievement of a dream, the realization of a dream. After this happened, everything would be okay and from then on we had to try to appease the situation and keep the most quiet possible form and have a nice, sweet, quiet development which was absolutely untrue, because the fact is that the fall of the Berlin Wall actually started the process, and did not end it. This is why there was a very strong suspicion on the part of the West towards any radical measures. This is why many of us have been labeled “extremists” even though there is nothing extreme in our behavior. As a matter of fact, it turned out that they were not

absolutely wrong in respect to some countries. What we have seen in the former Yugoslavia was a nightmare, which came out directly as a result of the change. What they did not manage to understand was that these are the exceptions, and the rule should be the other way around.

There is a third thing, which is usually called a pragmatic formula but it is very wrong. In their attempt to avoid problems, many of the Western countries were taking their friends for granted and trying to kind of please their enemies, again *bona fide* believing, that this way they will achieve peace and reconciliation and all this kind of stuff. “Reconciliation” has turned into a funny word because to plead reconciliation in a country like mine—where there is not a single repressed communist, where there were very few or rather inadequately few people put on trial, and where the former Communist Party was living in a pretty comfortable manner all the time—is kind of ridiculous. We did not have much to reconcile in terms of victimizations, in terms of repressions, in terms of whatever. Actually, the so-called “extremists”—the democrats—have already forgiven somehow. They were making fiery speeches, but it was all in the realm of words. There was not a single act of violence. So pleading reconciliation under these circumstances was kind of peculiar. Still, I have been talking to quite a number of people who say, “Yes you are okay now, but we can imagine that tomorrow it goes the way it was in Yugoslavia,” and then you have to spend hours and days proving that there is kind of a difference, but actually nobody believes it because they are scared themselves.

So if you take all this into account, you’ll see that we cannot blame them very much for not being helpful enough and, on the other hand, you cannot really expect governments to provide the only decent help that comes, and this is investment. All these kinds of aid and free lunches given from here and there do not really help. Probably they help a bit in terms of civil society and NGOs. But this was part of the understanding that was lacking and this is kind of natural, they could not really grasp the fact that “non-partisan” people are usually the former partisan communists. So I would not be too harsh on the West. It was just an unhappy, an unfortunate development which was to a large extent inevitable. The point is what comes after. If we are talking about globalization, it should be emphasized, particularly as far as our countries are concerned. If we are talking about stimuli or investments, again it should be thought in terms of our countries. But on the other hand, investors are kind of a cautious breed, and you cannot expect them to take unnecessary risks. Guarantees are to be there, but we have to do our own job.

Demokratizacija: Havel once said that foreign aid could be counter-productive to his transition. Boris Fyodorov, who had been the reform-minded finance minister of Russia, used to beg the Americans not to send money because at that time Viktor Chernomyrdin was already the prime minister and the money was being swallowed into a big black hole.

Dimitrov: But if you declare this publicly, you become an “enemy of the people.” [laughter from all]

Sarishvili-Chanturia: You could become an “enemy of the people” in the beginning, but then people perfectly understand where this money went and to whose pocket. So at the very beginning it was dangerous to say so, especially about humanitarian aid. All mafias existing in Georgia today are based on this money. All main mafias. They began to develop themselves using this money. But now people understand.

Rošca: We have the same case. Big external credits occurred and came in at the time of “our Chernomyrdin”—his name was Sangheli—this was in 1992–97. He was the prime minister and I can talk hours on end about better intentions of the West, of course, but my opinion is that these creditors gave credits as normal banks. I assume that those bankers, in the first place, thought that the money would come back to them in any case and they were not really thinking of a specific economic effect. We had power for three years, and legally speaking, formally, I was the third person in this hierarchy. We sent letters several times, like schoolchildren. We tried to find out what happened to the external debt, where the money went. We addressed them to the treasury but did not get an answer. The only information we received was the total sum, and nobody can really control and watch this, and I agree with Irina—we have the same and there is an old mafia of the former Communist Party *apparatus* who have lead the country for many years and they know where the money is and where it has gone. On the other hand, you know, I believe that the West and the experts who follow our region and development are not naïve. However, we should also remember that nobody in the world had experience of performing a transition from communism back to democracy and market economy. Nobody had ready and proven strategies.

Dimitrov: But we should not forget that the state is one thing and investors are an absolutely different one, commercial banks are a third. But when we speak of Western help we can only speak about help that came in through the state.

Rošca: I agree. From the state and of course different state structures such as OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] and the EU and so on. Of course, in the aspect of legislation and creation of pure normal democratic climate we should not underestimate Western help, because without the Western presence I think it would have ended up with cannibalism in the Republic of Moldova. Any government and any major leftist, antidemocratic party cannot completely ignore, let’s call it, the wishes of large Western powers. And then, practical help, why not? Through NGOs, through endowments that helped us to improve and perfect the electoral system and laws of freedom of speech, etc. They were very helpful. I would not also forget the fact that we were able to come to a multiparty system, we did it ourselves and peacefully. Probably not very advanced system, but it is important we achieved it.

Demokratizatsiya: As you have come to Mexico and conversed with our party

leader on how to build trade unions which are not official members of our pro-democracy parties but that nonetheless share ideological ties with them.

Rošca: You know, we actually tried it, a new law on trade unions. We tried to pass a new trade union law in 1998. We tried to launch all property of present trade union into privatization and to do it through government structures, because right now it is already impossible to restore. There is a so-called trade-union oligarchy, which even up to last year was still extracting dues from everybody's salary, as in Soviet times, for their trade union. Even all our deputies were trade-union members—all except for our fraction were members of trade unions, because they could go to a vacation at trade union's expense, etc. I think it can be just done, without fear of political influence on creation of new trade unions. Yes, there will be political influence, and so what? Yes, my party is willing to create alternative trade unions.