

Builders and Martyrs of the Unification of Bessarabia with Romania



Vladimir Cristi

(1882 - 1956)

representative of the Bessarabian boyar class,
political and State leader of Bessarabia.

Vladimir Cristi was born on July, 4 1882 in the village of Uscova¹ in the guberniya of Moscow [1], in a gentleman's family, the privileged upper class of the Russian Empire. His father was Grigore Cristi, an officer, dignitary and landowner, who had faithfully served Tsarist Russia and whose activity was not in Bessarabia, where he had been born, but in the higher spheres of the Russian imperial government [2].

In terms of lineage, V. Cristi was an exponent of the Russian aristocratic nobility. After a happy childhood and excellent schooling with highly qualified teachers, in 1901 he became a student of the Law Faculty of the University of Moscow. Later, in 1907, he became a student at the Academy of Agriculture in Montpellier, a city in southern France. He further specialised in Russia, France and Germany. In 1909, at the age of 27, he began to work not in Russia, but in Bessarabia, at the provincial level of the Tsarist State structures, namely in the zemstvo of the County of Orhei [3].

On May 5, 1910 by the decision of the Assembly of the Nobility's Deputies of Bessarabia, V. Cristi was granted the right to be in the social class of "Bessarabian nobility".

Between 1911 and 1914 he was elected in several administrative positions in the County of Orhei. He was a Member of the Medical Council, Honorary Justice of the Peace, Member of the Viticulture and Wine-making Committee. He was recognised as a landowner, having huge properties inherited from his grandparents and relatives, former Moldavian boyars [4].

During the First World War, having studies and the first military rank, i.e. Lieutenant, he exerted functions of logistics on the Galicia Front, he was a representative of the authorities of the Guberniya of Bessarabia, was sent in humanitarian missions to help the military hospitals, the soldiers and the wounded on the Front of Brodî, Jitomir, Vinița, etc. [5]. On August 1, 1915, he was appointed commander of the Red Cross Detachments from the Western Front, having the task of supplying and feeding all the military units deployed in war zones [6]. Holding great functions, management responsibilities, and working directly with Weapon Commanders on

¹The parents of Vladimir Cristi: his father, Grigore Ion Cristi (19.09.1856-17.03.1911) descended from a family of Moldovan boyars. After graduating from Moscow University, he participated in the Russian-Turkish war (1877-1878), was an honorary justice of the peace judge in the Guberniya of Riazani (1884). He was marshal of the Russian nobility in Moscow (1893-1896), head of the Russian nobility guard, deputy of the nobility of Bessarabia (1903), senator in the Russian Government (1905). His mother, Maria Trubețkaia (12.02.1860-10.04.1915), came from a family of noble Russians, daughter of Prince N.P. Trubețkoi. His brothers: Vladimir, Gheorghe, Victor and Sofia. Vladimir Cristi's godparents: his grandfather, Ion V. Cristi, with the rank of active State counsellor in the Russian Government led for a decade the zemstvo of Bessarabia; and Sofia Tolstoy, wife of Count Vladimir P. Tolstoy, a relative of the great writer L.N. Tolstoy. (Poștarencu, Dinu, Destin Românesc, nr-3-4, 2006)

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the west and southwest fronts, he was advanced in rank. For the merits exhibited in support of the Russian Army, in November 1915, Vladimir Cristi was raised to the rank of Colonel, was decorated with the Order of St. Anne, Grade III [7]. He fulfilled his military and supply tasks as commander of the Great Unit on the front until February 1917.

On March 6, 1917, he was transferred to Kishinev and appointed by the Provisional Government of Petrograd as assistant of the Gubernial Commissioner of Bessarabia. Whenever necessary and when the Gubernial Commissioner was leaving Kishinev or Bessarabia, V. Cristi was filling the commanding position as Gubernial Commissioner [8].

Vladimir Cristi chaired the Congress of the county commissioners of Bessarabia, which opened its session on June 15, 1917. At that moment, the governor C. Mimi was withdrawing from activity, making way for the young Bessarabian politician, Vladimir Cristi, who was managing so well the organisational and administrative affairs of the complicated post-war period.

Additionally Vladimir Cristi became a member of the Gubernial Executive Committee of Bessarabia, an administrative-executive body established by the Provisional Government of Russia. This Committee, as announced on 2 April 1917 by a newspaper of Kishinev, entrusted Vladimir Cristi with all its administrative-executive functions. In the turmoil of the political and social events that took place after the Revolution of February 1917, V. Cristi plunged “into social-democratic politics, entering a left-wing organisation, the Soviet of the peasants and workers from Cooperatives” [9].

It is worth mentioning the national interest of the State dignitary, and the forward-looking leap that occurred in V. Cristi’s conscience. Under the influence of the social and political transformations that intervened in 1917 in State structures, he promoted a policy of autonomy and even envisaged the exit from the Russian Federation. He overcame the caste mentality of Russian aristocracy and supported the Romanian-Bessarabian’s National Liberation Movement, which was definitely not the case of many representatives of Bessarabia’s nobility.

We shall present another important event for the future of Bessarabia, in which Vladimir Cristi participated fervently. Holding the position of assistant of the Gubernial Commissioner, he helped reject the territorial claims advanced by the Ukrainian Council, which tended to incorporate Bessarabia within Ukraine’s borders, while the Moldovans at a number of congresses held in Bessarabia pronounced themselves for a total autonomy of Bessarabia. He is eloquently talking about this difficult period in his activity in the work entitled “An Unusual Page in the History of Bessarabia” [10], published in the journal “Viața Basarabiei” (the Life of Bessarabia): “On July 12, 1917, I receive from Kiev a telegram signed by the Minister of the Interior of Ukraine, Vinicenco, through which I was invited to present myself on July 25, 1917 in Kiev, at a meeting of the governors of the provinces that were part of the autonomous Ukraine.” At the same time, the Moldovan National Party, led by Mr. Halippa and Vladimir Herta, received from Kiev the confidential information according to which the Council had sent a special delegation to Petrograd to obtain the decisive approval of the Russian Government in order to definitively establish the borders of the autonomous Ukraine, composed of 10 guberniyas, to which Bessarabia was also supposed to adhere. Understanding the gravity of the “historical moment”, V. Cristi decided to take personally the initiative of firm action against

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this annexationist tendency. He proposed to convene a “large meeting” on the issue of autonomy attended by the representatives of political parties, public organisations, zemstvo and town halls of Bessarabia. Gathering on July 20, 1917, under the presidency of Vladimir Cristi, all representatives spoke against the claims of the Ukrainian Council and pleaded for the autonomy of Bessarabia [11].

Since the respective debate considered it necessary that a delegation leave for Kiev to discuss the issue and annul the decision of the Ukrainian Council, another secret meeting was held on this issue with Pan Halippa, Ion Pelivan, Vladimir Herța and Paul Gore. On July 25, 1917, Vladimir Cristi, Pantelimon Erhan and a delegate of the Soldiers’ Committee arrived in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, informing the officials here about the protest of the Bessarabians regarding the aim pursued by Ukraine to incorporate Bessarabia. Although the Ukrainian side assured that they were not pursuing this goal, the Council of Ministers of Petrograd, following the report presented by Ukrainian Minister Vinicenco, definitively established Ukraine’s borders, which included ten provinces, among which Bessarabia.

The Bessarabian delegation realised the deception orchestrated by the Ukrainian diplomacy, left Russia and came to Petrograd, where three days later, with the help of the Moldovan soldiers from the guard regiments here, managed to enter the “Winter Palace” where the Council of Ministers was holding its meetings, and taking advantage of the moment, accosted Alexandr Kerenski, President of the Provisional Government of Russia, to whom they had described the issue. Although he replied that the judgment could not be reviewed, Al. Kerenski promised them that they would be invited to the meetings of the Council of Ministers to submit their problem, which indeed happened shortly afterwards. Vladimir Cristi read before the Russian Government the memorandum he had prepared, demonstrated through documents the statehood of Moldova, the ethnographic map of Bessarabia drawn by Alexie Nour and another map of the 17th century on which the territory between the Prut and the Dniester was represented as belonging to the Principality of Moldavia. Vladimir Cristi also mentioned that the 100,000 Bessarabian soldiers and officers would withdraw from the Romanian front if Ukraine took Bessarabia. After a brief discussion of the government ministers, Alexander Kerenski stated that the Russian Government reviewed its decision “and recognised the right to self-determination and federal autonomy of Bessarabia”, as in the case of Ukraine[10]. The next day this decision was published in the Russian newspapers in Petrograd. Vladimir Cristi was acknowledging that the major support in this regard was given by the Central Committee of the Moldovan Soldiers of Petrograd. He further worked with the Central Committee of the Moldovan Soldiers, helped by Moldovan military and regiments in terms of logistics and supplies. He collaborated with officers Gr. Pântea, N. Secară, T. Cojocari, N. Furtună and other Bessarabian officers of the Moldovan Army.

The journal Cuvânt Moldovenesc of 12 September 1917 informed the population that instead of C. Mimi, who had resigned from his position as gubernial commissioner, the Bessarabian Gubernial Executive Committee had appointed Vladimir Cristi, I. Inculeț and E. Kenigșat, and that together they would form the Commissariat, one them being also designed President.”

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In the first session of the Country Council, Vladimir Cristi submitted his mandate as Gubernial Commissioner of Bessarabia, becoming a MP in this legislative body. He was elected deputy in the Country Council at the 3rd Congress of the delegates of Peasants, empowered by the communes of Bessarabian counties. His mandate as deputy was validated on November 21, 1917, i.e. the very day of the opening of the Country Council's session till December 6, 1917, during which time he was a Member of the Anti-Anarchy and Supply Commission, as well as a Member of the Commission of Statements and Statutes. Bessarabia, as well as Russia, was witnessing a period of extreme poverty, anarchy and dismantling of their central power. Kishinev was invaded by Bolshevik Russian armies, a total chaos was reigning. During the Country Council meeting of December 7, 1917, which lasted till late at night, was formed the Cabinet of General Directors of the Moldovan Democratic Republic, the portfolio of internal affairs being attributed to Vladimir Cristi. Alongside I. Pelivan he was delegated by the Board of Directors to intervene with the Romanian Army and the Headquarter of the French Troops to request military assistance regarding the sudden deterioration of the political situation in Bessarabia due to the hostile actions of Russian military units affected by pandemonium. Being in Iasi from December 8 to December 17, 1917, they discussed with representatives of the Entente, from whom they did not obtain anything, then with some commanders of the Romanian Army, including with the Bessarabian General Al. Averescu and Romania's Prime Minister, Ion. I.C. Brătianu.

Nicolae Iorga recorded in his memoirs that he was visited at his editorial office by Ion Pelivan, accompanied by Vladimir Cristi, "an educated man, who speaks French and Italian and who, forewarned against Romania, is now pleased with what he has seen here."

The situation in Bessarabia was serious, out of control, and Bessarabian authorities were not able to fight with their own forces against the mass disorder caused by the Bolshevik Russian military units. The Russian soldiers arrested the officers, disarmed the Moldovan military units, and robbed the homes and households of wealthy citizens, devastated shops and warehouses. P. Erhan, Chairman of the Board of Directors, I. Pelivan, General Director of Foreign Affairs, and Vladimir Cristi, General Director of the Interior, acting officially, on the basis of the powers granted by the Country Council, addressed the Commander of the Russian Army, Scerbaciov, and the Minister of War of Romania asking them to send the Romanian Army as soon as possible to Kishinev, together with the Transdnestrian Regiment in Kiev, "so that this Regiment remain at the disposal of the Directorate of the Moldovan Republic". The Minister of War, General Iancovescu, approved their request. After these discussions, the Moldovan delegation withdrew to Kishinev.

Under the conditions of a true aggression unleashed by the Bolshevik factions at the beginning of January 1918, which threatened to block completely the activity of the Country Council, of the members of the Republic's Government and of the Moldovan Bloc in the Bessarabian Legislature, the Romanian Army did not intervene. On January 6-7, 1918, two sessions were held to discuss the political situation created. In accordance with the decisions adopted, several groups of Bessarabians, led by I. Pelivan, A. Crihan, V. Țanțu and Vladimir Cristi, returned on different routes to Iași in order to expedite the military assistance. Meanwhile the problem was

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solved, the 11th Romanian Division, General Brătianu, arrived at Kishinev, and the political and social situation was stabilized.

Gifted with a special organisational talent and promoting the popular militia detachments, the Country Council granted him the Home Affairs portfolio also in the second Government of Bessarabia, which was founded on January 19, 1918, under the presidency of Daniel Ciugureanu. On March 27, 1918, the Union of Bessarabia with Romania was voted. He became an active politician.

As a politician, Vladimir Cristi went to Iasi, accompanying the delegation of the members of the Country Council to submit to King Ferdinand I the strongly worded Memorial of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania. On April 11, 1918 he was designated delegate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Romanian Government.

He became a Member of the People's Party and deputy in the Parliament of Romania (1926), and was senator and first Vice-President of the Senate. Between January 16 and May 12, 1932, he served as Secretary of State in the Government led by Nicolae Iorga [12].

In June 1932 he joined the Agrarian Union, and was elected in the leadership of the Agrarian Party. In the journal "Din trecutul nostru" (From Our Past) (1936), was inserted the following news: "The party of former Bessarabian big landowners led by Vladimir Cristi is part of C. Argetoianu's Agrarian Union".

On September 25, 1938, the newspaper "Basarabia" informed the inhabitants of Kishinev about the appointment of Vladimir Cristi as Mayor of Kishinev. The situation in the City Hall and in Kishinev was tense by the fact that for a period of time part of the population of Kishinev had supported the Iron Guard, the legionnaires. The former mayor was suspended and arrested by order of King Carol II, and Vladimir Cristi managed to settle the conflicts that had merged, "led a pacifist policy", said the Bessarabian newspapers of those days [12]. On January 21, 1939, the same newspaper of Kishinev informed its readers that the Romanian Government had appointed Vladimir Cristi in the National Superior Council of the National Renaissance Front, responsible for agriculture and manual labour, a party formed by King Carol II, which during 1938-1940 suspended the activity of other political parties. Taking into account that he was both a farmer and a landowner, he felt also obliged to be Honorary President of the Union of Wine and Fruit Trade Unions of Bessarabia and Romania. At the Congress held in Bucharest he was elected as the permanent Vice-President of the respective Union [13].

The events and deeds of the life and activity of the Statesman Vladimir Cristi were written in detail in the works: "La răspântie" (At the Crossroads), author Dm. Bogos, and in the book "Le problème de Bessarabie", author I. Pelivan, as well as in the articles published in the periodicals of that time. After the Soviet ultimatum, in 1940 he fled to Romania and worked for a year in the Romanian Government, in agriculture.

After World War II, in May-June 1944, Vladimir Cristi fled with his family from Kishinev to Bucharest, living for a while in a house of his family friend, C. Argetoianu.

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The situation in Romania was complicated. The Romanian and German troops were withdrawing from the Soviet space. Vladimir Cristi succeeded, with the help of his friends and connections, to reach Austria, where he worked on a farmer.

In 1944, Austria, as well as other Western countries, was teeming with Soviet agents, who knew German well and were specialists in gathering information on the ground about the military, economic situation of the enemy. These spies had the mission of transmitting information about the dislocation and activity of politicians, officers, and criminals, i.e. Soviet traitors, from Ukraine, Bessarabia and Romania, who had taken refuge in various countries of Western Europe. The information about these people and other groups of individuals who had fought against the USSR (including former Russian soldiers, Crimean Tartars, Russian Cossacks, etc.) were sent to the NKVD, the Military and Special Information Centre [14]. Vladimir Cristi, who was on the black list of these secret services, also reached the site of the Soviet agency. Vladimir Cristi was arrested with his family as “enemy of the people” and sent to the USSR Detention Centre for investigations. He was separated from his family, humiliated, maltreated, went to several prisons, as he was neither a Russian nor a Soviet citizen. Soviet Russians punished him because he had been a Commander of the Bessarabian Government, a Member and Minister in the Country Council, and had managed to sever Bessarabia from Bolshevik Russia and Ukraine.

Being a Romanian citizen, former deputy, senator, politician and statesman of Romania, and as they had no legal basis, after 1950 the Soviet authorities handed him over to the communist authorities in Bucharest for trial and extermination in some Romanian prison.

He died ill and humiliated in 1956 in the Psychiatry Section of Văcărești prison in Bucharest. He was buried at night in a mass grave of the prisoners, in the cemetery opposite the prison, in Berceni area (according to the testimonies of his relatives).

The man who had been honoured with Russian and Romanian distinctions: Orders: St. Vladimir; St. George (Russian); Cultural Merit; Ferdinand as Commander; The Crown of Romania; The Star of Romania in the rank of Officer; The Aviation Medal, disappeared from history’s firmament as an anonymous.

The encyclopaedist writer from Moldova, Iurie Colesnic, with the help of an intermediary, Nina Bogos-Manoilă, wanted to get in touch with the sole heir of Vladimir Cristi, his son Alexandru, who was living in Bucharest but who declined the meeting on behalf of his illness. In fact, he was avoiding everybody, with the exception of his old high school and college colleagues. In the Central Cemetery in Kishinev, on one of the side alleys, there are five tombs of the Cristi family. In Bessarabia they remained as testimonies of a nation pilgrimage. In fact, history retains only the information it needs; the rest is entrusted, without regrets, to anonymity...

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Notes: In the document no.55, issued on March 10, 1932, the following land properties are listed as belonging to Vladimir Cristi: "In the village of Teleșeu, Orhei County, he owns 14 hectares of arable land, 17 hectares of vineyards and 1 ha of olive trees, and in the village of Zamcioji from the commune of Radeni, Lăpușna county - 118 hectares of arable land, 22 ha of vineyards, 15 ha of meadows, 27 ha of orchard and 9 hectares of vineyards. His property of Zamcioji, with a total area of 214 ha 1,154 square meters, included: the manor together with the park (6 ha 6,684 square meters), apple and plumb orchards (24 ha 7,500 square meters), walnut orchards (22 ha 230 square meters), in the pasture (6 ha 2095 square meters), arable and hayfield (143 ha 810 square meters) and acacia plantations (5 ha). On this Zamcioli estate he had the following buildings: the main building in which the owner resided, with 25 rooms and a kitchen of 3 rooms, a beautiful building made of stone and covered with Marseille tiles. In another building, with two storeys, lived the estate administrator. There were also a wine cellar, stables for horses and cows, cellars, and an ice chamber.

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