



PROFILE OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT : REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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PROFILE SUMMARY

Profile summary for the Republic of Moldova

The armed conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the secessionist Transdniestrian region from March-July 1992 displaced up to 51,000 persons internally and forced up to 80,000 persons to seek refuge in third countries, mainly in neighbouring Ukraine. A ceasefire signed in July 1992 enabled most of the displaced persons and refugees to return. However, between 6,000 and 10,000 IDPs remained displaced from the Transdniestrian region and had no other option but to integrate locally (UNHCR 1998). As of December 2001, only 1,000 IDPs continued to receive any assistance from UNHCR, while national authorities ceased to devote specific attention to the issue since the mid 1990s (UNHCR June 2002). Meanwhile, the hostility of the secessionist regime in the Transdniestrian region towards those who do not support its separatist line has made integration of the returnees difficult, undermining their cultural and political rights.

The conflict and the displacement crisis

Formerly a part of the Soviet Union until August 1991, Moldova is populated in majority by Romanian-speaking ethnic Moldovans (65 percent of the total population), but has also a significant Slavic-Russian speaking minority (26 percent). The latter group includes mainly ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, who constitute the majority in the area located on the eastern bank of the Dniester river along the border with Ukraine (the Transdniestrian region). However, ethnic Moldovans form the largest single group in this area too, with 40 percent of the population. A Gagauz minority (3 percent) lives in the south of the country (U.S. DOS 4 March 2002).

The loosening of Moscow's political control during the Perestroika era in the late 1980s opened the door to the aspirations of the ethnic Moldovan population, regarding cultural and linguistic rights, independence, and for some nationalist groups, reunification with Romania. A new language law adopted in 1989 proclaimed Moldovan the new state language in the Moldovan SSR, though retaining Russian as the official language for inter-ethnic communication. The non-ethnic Moldovan population, which suddenly found itself in an environment politically dominated by the Moldovan majority, resisted the implementation of the new law, particularly in the eastern industrial centres. The development of a "reactive nationalism" among the minorities led to the secession of the Transdniestrian region from Moldova in September 1990, with the support of the Soviet 14th Army stationed in Transdniestria (Neukirch 2001).

Armed skirmishes were reported in the course of 1991 between Moldovan and Transdniestrian armed forces, paramilitary groups and other militias. In March 1992, the Moldovan government launched a major military offensive to regain control of the Transdniestrian region, but its forces met with the serious resistance of local armed forces. Following the intervention of the 14th Army, a ceasefire was signed in Moscow in July 1992. In total, the armed confrontation displaced some 130,000 persons, 51,000 of them within Moldova. About 80 percent of the internally displaced persons were ethnic Moldovans, and 15 percent were Russians or Ukrainians (IOM 1997).

Return

The ceasefire agreement consolidated the Transdniestrian region by creating a security zone between the two parties enforced by a tripartite peacekeeping force, comprising Moldovan, Transdniestrian and Russian units. The agreement also provided for both parties to the conflict to open negotiations on the return of the displaced population. Despite the absence of any formal agreement on this issue so far, most IDPs and

refugees have gone back to their homes. Freedom of movement between Moldova and Transnistria has been restored, although vehicles and goods circulating across the ceasefire line may be subjected to controls by Transnistrian or Moldovan authorities (U.S. DOS 4 March 2002).

However, between 6,000 and 10,000 internally displaced persons were unable to return and were still awaiting permanent solutions in 1998 (UNHCR 1998). Moreover, there have been reports of a number of returnees and residents leaving the Transnistrian region, as a result of the hostile environment imposed by the Transnistrian regime (Nantoi 1999, UNHCR 1999).

Several factors have been identified to explain the reluctance of the remaining IDPs to return. There has been no amnesty adopted for those who were involved in the 1992 conflict on the side of the Moldovan forces. Law allows the death penalty for those who took up arms against the Transnistrian authorities, although there have been no cases of executions reported so far. In some cases, return has also been hampered by the occupation or deprivation of properties or occupancy rights by the Transnistrian authorities, who have reallocated "abandoned" properties or apartments to newly arrived Russian citizens (Nantoi 1999).

The Transnistrian authorities have also been extremely reluctant to enforce the right to education for the ethnic Moldovan population. Only eight schools in the Transnistrian region teach in the Moldovan language, using the Latin alphabet, after a decade of resistance from the separatist authorities and intimidation and threats against Moldovan teachers not using the Cyrillic alphabet (Nantoi 1999, U.S. DOS 4 March 2002).

Transnistrian authorities have severely restricted any expression of opposition, in particular regarding its separatist policy. Strict censorship has been imposed on the media, and political opponents risk arbitrary detention, torture, and unfair trial. Also, residents in the Transnistrian region have been forbidden to take part in elections in Moldova proper (IHF 2002). Another impediment to return has been the military service imposed on the male residents in the Transnistrian region, despite the absence of any constitutional status of the Transnistrian forces. There have been cases of draft evaders leaving the Transnistrian region, and then forcefully returned by the Moldovan authorities (Nantoi 1999).

In a survey sponsored by UNHCR in 2000, interviewed IDPs also mentioned threats from the Transnistrian administration and the impossibility to find a job as reasons for them not to return (For Confidence Building Association 2000).

Integration

Most IDPs who did not return after the cessation of armed hostilities, have been left with no other option but to settle in Moldova proper. The Moldovan government adopted various measures to facilitate their integration. Accommodation was provided to displaced households, in priority to combatants and political activists. IDPs also got their resident status legalized and received some material help. This help was however seriously constrained by the State's limited financial capacity and bureaucratic barriers (UNHCR 1998).

Economic and social conditions in Moldova have been far from favourable to the integration of IDPs. Moldova is among the poorest countries in Europe, with 80 percent of the population living below the poverty line. All health indicators have dramatically deteriorated, reducing the life expectancy to 66 years (IFRC 2001). It is estimated that over 500,000 Moldovan citizens, that is one person in every third household, work abroad, mainly in the Russian Federation and western and central European countries (IOM 2002, p. 113).

Unlike other countries confronted with secessionist territories, the Moldovan government has not shown any will to maintain the issue of internal displacement visible as one of the unsolved issue from the conflict with the Transnistrian region. Most measures targeted the households displaced before or during the

1992 armed conflict, while persons displaced after the ceasefire have been largely ignored. The Republican Committee created in 1992 to deal with the IDP crisis was dissolved in 1995. Since then, there has been no central body specifically mandated with IDPs, no legal framework providing for the protection of IDPs, and no plan for emergency preparedness in case of new displacement crises. The registration of IDPs has also been disrupted, explaining the absence of updated official statistics. Finally, the Moldovan government has never demonstrated any concern of for the IDP issue in its talks with the separatist administration in Tiraspol (UNHCR 29 May 2002).

Internally displaced persons have organised themselves and work with other NGOs to palliate the lack of attention from the authorities. For instance, the Society for Refugees provides legal assistance to IDPs through a close collaboration with the "Movement of Transdnistrian Refugees", an association of internally displaced persons in Moldova (UNHCR/ICS 2002).

The international response

UNHCR has been the most active international agency in providing assistance and protection to internally displaced persons in Moldova. However, the low level of donors' support has obliged the refugee agency to limits its intervention to a small number of activities. In cooperation with the World Bank and the OSCE, several educational and medical facilities have been rehabilitated and equipped in mixed-community areas of Transdnistria (UNHCR June 2002). The estimated number of IDPs still of concern to UNHCR amounted to 1,000 persons as December 2001, but this figure only includes IDPs who have approached UNHCR for assistance (UNHCR June 2002 & 29 May 2002).

Since 1993, the original mandate of the OSCE mission in Moldova has been to facilitate the resolution of the conflict with the Transdnistrian region. This includes the provision of expertise on human and minority rights, democratic transformation and the repatriation of refugees. Despite numerous meetings and proposals, negotiations on the status of the Transdnistrian region with Moldova have so far failed to produce any significant result (Neukirch 2001). A new round of negotiations (the "Chisinau round") started in August 2002, but authorities in Tiraspol continue to show extreme reluctance to reach any agreement with Moldova (OSCE 23 August 2002). The status quo has largely contributed to the consolidation of economic interests among ruling elites in Tiraspol, including through the development of illegal trafficking activities across the open "border" with Moldova. However, there has also been persistent resistance in Moldova proper to a political settlement with the Transdnistrian region. This resistance has been demonstrated again by the virulent reaction of opposition parties to the recent proposal of the Moldovan government to introduce compulsory teaching of Russian in schools and to recognize it as an official language in the Constitution (Neukirch 2001, COE 23 April 2002).

The OSCE Mission in Moldova has also been given the mandate to monitor and facilitate the removal of the Russian troops and military equipment, pursuant to decisions taken by the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in 1999. Analysts see this process as an essential step towards the settlement of the Transdnistrian dispute. The former 14th Army (renamed the Operation Group of Russian Forces) has already seen its contingent drastically reduced from 9,000 to 2,600 troops, including peacekeepers. The OSCE has embarked on a project to dispose of 40,000 tonnes of munitions and weapons stored in the north of the country (Neukirch 2001, Hill 2002).

(August 2002)

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner

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