

Stuck between poverty and exile in Moldova

Life is hard in Moldova, the small agricultural country stuck between Rumania and Ukraine. The ludicrous wages and lack of decent jobs are forcing roughly half of the country's workforce to go abroad. Though the money sent by migrant workers is saving Moldova from economic chaos, it is doing nothing to solve the many social and family crises.

The ICFTU's affiliate the CSRM has been targeted by a ghost union backed by the government, but has managed to stem its loss of members thanks to a new campaign to organise workers in the informal economy. It has also played a key role in maintaining dialogue with Transnistria, the Moldovan region that declared its independence shortly after the fall of the USSR, which is still run by a authoritarian regime.

Here is our report.



Government ploy to break the trade union movement

The CSRM (1), the Moldovan trade union confederation affiliated to the ICFTU, has been under assault from the authorities for over four years. They are doing everything to press workers to join the ranks of a union closely linked to the Government, "Solidaritatea", and have abolished sanctions for workers' rights violations.

When the communists returned to power at the beginning of the new millennium, their first priority was not to improve the well being of Moldova's inhabitants, despite them being among the poorest in Europe. They chose, rather, to tighten their grip on the workers by instigating the creation of a new, more acquiescent trade union confederation than the CSRM. They then used their influence to coerce workers into leaving the CSRM and join the newly formed organisation, "Solidaritatea".

"When the authorities attack one of our federations, the trade union representatives are summoned by the employer, who calls on them to withdraw from the CSRM and affiliate with Solidaritatea," explains CSRM president, Petru Chiriac. "It's so much 'easier' that Moldova's employers form part of the same union as their employees, a situation we have denounced on countless occasions. The same technique is employed with public sector workers: the district presidents inform their subordinates that they have to respect the authorities' decision that public service workers should leave the CSRM and join the confederation linked to the communists. The same happened with the teachers' union: the district presidents met with the school directors and the trade union representatives to notify them of the government's wish to see them leave the CSRM and join Solidaritatea, pointing out that the teachers would otherwise be subjected to greater control and intimidation"

NO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING WITHOUT DISAFFILIATION

The Health Ministry, for its part, is ensuring that collective bargaining in the sector remains deadlocked, in order to force the health workers' federation, Sanatatea, to leave the CSRM. The ICF-

TU Annual Survey of Trade Union Right Violations in 2004 reports on this new example of government coercion: "The Ministry of Health has undertaken a deliberate campaign to undermine and ultimately destroy the trade union of healthcare workers. The initiative comes from the top echelons of the Ministry. The Deputy Minister of Health, Mr. Bahnarel, who is in charge of preventive medicine institutions, discredits trade union leaders, intervenes in trade union meetings and demands that trade union organisations disaffiliate from "Sanatatea", explaining that this is on the orders of the Minister of Health. Heads of medical institutions that refuse to put pressure on trade unions are threatened with dismissal."

"We are confronted with numerous situations whereby employers refuse to employ someone unless he or she undertakes not to join a union," underlines. This is notably the case in companies that are part or fully owned by foreign capital, such as MacDonald's and Coca Cola

Petru Chiriac, CSRM president

In January 2004, the CSRM lodged a complaint against the Moldovan government for the violation of trade union rights with the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association. The Committee requested the government should hold an independent enquiry into the allegations of the CSRM. "But neither the ILO nor the ICFTU missions were able to obtain recognition from the government that it is involved in this process of interference," laments Petru Chiriac. "The President of Moldova told us that he does not deal with matters of trade union recognition and the Prime Minister asked us to show documents in which such orders are given, but we do not have such documents. We have the minutes of the meetings convening mayors in the presence

of State representatives. These meetings were held under administrative pretexts but, in reality, they were about unions affiliating to Solidaritatea and withdrawing from the CSRM, but this is not mentioned in the minutes. We have discussed the problem within the Republican Commission for Social Dialogue and Collective Bargaining, a tripartite commission, but it did not lead anywhere. On the contrary, we are being accused of denigrating the country's image, ruining the government's and the president's reputation by calling on international organisations."

NO SANCTIONS FOR BREACHES OF THE LAW

The CSRM filed a complaint with the Office of Public Prosecutions in Moldova, but was informed that the case could not be investigated as the new Penal Code does not provide for any penal liability for breaches of trade union rights. In addition to the government, this legal reform is clearly a boon for unscrupulous employers. "We are confronted with numerous situations whereby employers refuse to employ someone unless he or she undertakes not to join a union," underlines Petru Chiriac. This is notably the case in companies that are part or fully owned by foreign capital, such as MacDonald's, Coca Cola, or even the cement plant partly owned by the French group Lafarge."

The meddling of the authorities in the internal affairs of the CSRM has dealt a devastating blow to the trade union confederation. Fourteen out of the 24 federations affiliated to it have left to join Solidaritatea. The ICFTU is currently using economic pressure in an attempt to urge the Moldovan government to cease its violations of trade union rights. It has requested the European Union not to grant Moldova additional trade preferences until it respects these rights. This could deprive Moldova of one development tool for its economy. The president of the CSRM refutes this argument: "I am well aware of the extreme poverty of very many Moldovans, but what other means do we have to stop the meddling in the affairs of the trade union movement? This kind of pressure is needed to improve the situation of the trade unions, and hence that of all Moldovan workers." ●

(1) Confedratia Sindicatelor din Republica Moldova, site Web: <http://www.csrn.md/>

"Legal employment is the wealth of the nation"

The growth of the informal economy in Moldova has provoked a decline in the membership of the CSRM, the country's main trade union confederation. The ICFTU and the ILO are backing the trade union centre in its campaign to organise informal workers. Despite many obstacles, a number of victories in the early stages of the campaign have encouraged the trade union centre to push ahead with its battle.

The ICFTU affiliate from Moldova, the CSRM, launched an extensive public awareness campaign early this year on the sweatshop conditions in the country's informal economy. The campaign waged under the heading "Legal employment is the wealth of the nation" was endorsed by the ICFTU and the ILO and has received wide coverage in the Moldavian media. Thousands of leaflets, booklets and posters have been distributed throughout numerous workplaces most prone to informal activity: businesses, public transport, agricultural cooperatives, etc.

"Despite the lack of reliable official statistics on the issue, union estimates rate informal sector output at approximately 50% of GDP," notes CSRM vice president Vsevolod Barbaneagra (1). "Certain economists believe the figure to be closer to 60%. The scale of the problem can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the government's poor economic policies, whereby soaring tax levels mean that anyone actually wanting to pay all the taxes runs the risk of going bankrupt. Secondly, corruption, with numerous State officials reaping direct dividends from the informal economy, either by running privately owned small-scale informal businesses, or by accepting bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye."

According to union estimates, only between 2 and 3% of the estimated 400,000 people directly or indirectly involved in the informal economy in Moldova are organised. The scope for organising is thus enormous. Thanks to this recruitment drive, the CSRM has already managed to stabilise its membership figures. The organisation experienced a steady decline in its membership, from roughly 2 million in 1991, to 623,200 in 2001, and 400,232 in 2005. The causes of



this downward trend are linked to widespread company closures, the emigration of workers, divisions within the trade union movement, and the rise in informal sector activity. This latter trend is now being curbed primarily thanks to the organisation of informal workers.

A massive public awareness raising campaign was needed to overcome certain, still widespread, preconceived ideas. "There was a public perception (which in some cases still remains, notably on the employers' side) that the informal economy contributes to job creation," explains Vsevolod Barbaneagra. "However, these new jobs are poor quality. In addition to tax evasion,

workers' rights are blatantly violated: the right to employment (there is no protection against dismissals since there is no employment contract to speak of), to a daily rest period, to days of leave, to medical insurance (employers do not pay social security contributions), etc."

Apart from media based awareness campaigns, reaching out to the workers of the informal economy has required a considerable amount of energy on the part of Moldavian unions. One of these is the Union of Employees and Small Traders (SindLUCAS). Set up in 2002, this organisation represents 8,000 members, mainly in the trade and catering sectors. Unfair employer practices are widespread in this sector, such as unpaid forced overtime and the payment of 50% of wages cash in hand. In the face of fierce employer hostility, unions experience difficulty in making direct contact with the workforce, which is mainly composed of female workers within the 30 to 40 year age group. SindLUCAS occasionally receives the help of volunteer activists (retired members, students,...) for the distribution of materials to the workers. "Because our phone number is indicated on the leaflets, I often receive calls from workers complaining about their situation and seeking advice," explains SindLUCAS vice president Anastasia Roman. "I suggest a face-to-face meeting and try to find out where they are employed. It is hard to con-

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"None of the terms of our employment contracts are actually respected"

Valeriu, 34, is a minibus driver on the 108 route that runs through the metropolitan area of Chisinau, the Moldavian capital. Officially, he is employed by a private passenger transport company, with a contract which conforms with national legislation. In reality, however, he was hired by a bus owner who pays the bus company for the right to operate on this route. He complains about his situation: "Our wage amounts to what we're left with at the end of the day, once we have paid all the usual charges such as minibus rental to the owner, or the various bribes paid-out to the police. I usually manage to bring home between 1 and

3 euros a day. But sometimes, I'm left with nothing at all. The policemen harass us, especially during peak hours, when business is good. They use a thousand pretexts to threaten us with fines, which can be anything between 700 and 1000 lei (46 to 66 euros). Almost the entirety of these fines has to be paid in black, and if we refuse, they take us to the police station, and we lose our customers. None of the terms of our employment contracts are actually respected, not even access to seats or toilets at the minibus terminus. In case of illness, we are paid 33 lei (2.1 euros) a month! We work between 5 and 22 hours every day to be treated in this manner, but there are no other job opportunities here. I recently heard about the existence of trade unions in our sector, and I would like to be part of one."

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vince them of the fact that they need us. Because they fear reprisals from their employers, it can sometimes take up to 6 months to convince 5 workers to join."

"COMMANDO OPERATIONS" IN SHOPPING CENTRES

SindLUCAS occasionally resorts to "commando operations" to approach workers. According to SindLUCAS President Valentina Mazur: *"For example on 25 and 26 August, all the participants of a seminar we had organised within the framework of the 'Legal employment is the wealth of the nation' campaign visited seven shopping centres in Chisinau to inform workers about their rights. We were split in groups of eight people, each one entering the shopping mall through a different entrance. We then quickly approached the shop assistants to hand out our leaflets before the security guards could intervene. If they see us, they force us to leave. We tell the shop assistants to hide the leaflet and to read it once they are on their own."*

Meanwhile, Business-Sind, a union federation also affiliated to CSRM is trying to organise public market workers, whose job status is halfway between formal and informal. Whilst some of them sell their own produce, others are on the payroll of producers, or hired on a day-by-day basis, with or without a work contract... Business-Sind started off by consulting each category of workers, to identify their problems. This process revealed that the corruption of officials belonging to the various inspection bodies (food

quality, police, fire brigade,...) ranks among the chief concerns of workers in these sectors. The union thus approached the heads of these departments, suggesting that workers be charged a single overall tax rather than having to make separate, mostly illegal payments to each one of them. Agreements to this effect have been concluded in certain sectors. Business-Sind furthermore threatened to publicly denounce government servants for taking bribes, if necessary by reporting them to the ministry. This type of action has earned Business-Sind increasing confidence among shop assistants, who are becoming increasingly open to the wage demands put forward by the union on their behalf.

16 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK

Extensive organising drives have also taken place in the public minibuses transport services, which became part of the informal economy upon its privatisation by the government. Iurie Ciorba, the very vocal President of the CSRM-affiliated Transport Workers' Union denounces the labour rights abuses to which the minibus drivers are subjected: *"The public authorities have granted licences to 28 companies, allowing them to run minibus services on certain intercity routes. Officially, the drivers are on the payroll of these companies, which make them sign employment contracts. In reality, however, the drivers are hired and employed by the minibus owners. They are required to pay a monthly charge of 1,600 lei (105 euros) per vehicle to the company that has been granted a licence for the route the driver covers. Most of these minibus*

owners do not themselves drive the vehicles. They are usually high ranking officials (politicians, judges, top public officials,...). They force the drivers to pay them the monthly fee of 1,600 lei, in addition to a daily rental fee of 300 lei (20 euros). None of this is declared. The job contract states that the drivers should receive 440 lei a month from the company, but this money is never paid out. Corruption is rife. The drivers' income amounts to whatever money remains from the sale of tickets to the passengers once they have paid for petrol and maintenance, given out bribes to public servants and paid the daily rental of the minibus.... They have to work 7 days a week, 16 hours a day, which inevitably causes fatigue and accidents. These drivers are exploited by everyone: the public authorities, the companies, the bus owners. We open their eyes to these exploitative practices, and with the invaluable help of our outstanding union recruiters, as in the case of the Chisinau-Straseni route, we have so far managed to enrol 700 drivers."

At the same time as curbing the decline in CSRM membership and regularising the situation of workers, these initial organising drives have also had a moral impact on society. *"The informal economy leads young people to consider tax evasion, lying and fraud as normal. This is by no means the proper way of developing our society, which is why we have to stand up against the spread of such practices,"* concludes Vsevolod Barbaneagra. ●

(1) Vsevolod Barbaneagra has in the meantime left the CSRM to be the coordinator of a trade union cooperation project in Central Asia.

The closure of the kolkhozes has dealt a serious blow to trade unions

The transition from a centrally planned economy to the free market has led to the closure of most of the kolkhozes. These agricultural units that operated in the form of cooperatives were widespread during the Soviet era, when the land was State owned. In Moldova, where agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, the privatisation of this sector took place via the allocation of plots amongst the workers in the kolkhozes. Each worker received, on average, one hectare of land. The equipment and buildings were supposed to have been sold, and the profits shared between the workers of the former kolkhoz.

The CSRM condemns the swindles that took place during the agricultural reform process. It points out that former kolkhoz leaders misappropri-

ated part of the equipment, sold off the rest, and used their influence to obtain the best plots of land. The land reform has dealt a devastating blow to the agricultural workers' union: membership fell drastically when workers started cultivating the land individually and lost interest in the union. Many of these workers subsequently regrouped upon realising that the plots they were allotted were too small to cater for the basic needs of their families and that individual workers did not have the necessary tools and equipment. Some sold off their plots to larger landowners, whilst others rented them out to cooperatives and now cultivate them together with other members. The CSRM affiliated agricultural workers' union Agroindsind is currently trying to recover the members lost following the land reform. The union is primarily targeting cooperatives or PLCs where employers seem

the least opposed to union recognition. This is notably the case in the Ungheni region, close to the Romanian border. Agroindsind regional officer Ludmila Guzun explains the approach used by her organisation: *"We approach the workers in the fields to convince them of the benefits of joining the union. One of our first successes was in the Fortunabilis PLC that covers an area of 225 hectares and has a staff of around 60 workers. When the workers became aware of the importance of the union, we approached the employer, who showed no opposition to union recognition. This led to the signing of a collective agreement thanks to which the workers are now paid 1,000 lei (66 euros) a month during the season (500-600 off season), compared with approximately 700 lei elsewhere. We are now trying to use this positive example to convince other workers in the region to join our ranks."*

A forgotten cold war

The civil war that tore apart Moldavia in 1992 has given way to a cold war between the governments of Moldova and the self-proclaimed republic of Trans-Dniester. Arms have been laid down but dialogue between the authorities on the two sides remains completely stalled. Thanks to the support of the ICFTU, the unions of Moldova and Trans-Dniester recently renewed contact and have even signed a cooperation agreement. The workers are hoping to pave the way to a thaw in relations between the two camps.

Moldova is not only one of the poorest States of Europe, but it is also one of the most divided. The eastern side of the country, bordering Ukraine, unilaterally declared independence at the beginning of the nineties, an independence that no country has ever recognised. This farcical situation, epitomised by a border manned by overzealous customs officials (with a penchant for bribes), is creating serious practical problems for the inhabitants of the two territories. The two communities still in fact maintain close economic and administrative ties, given that Trans-Dniester has to import virtually all of its consumer goods and since its independence has not been recognised, its inhabitants still require Moldovan documents to travel. Certain



families, moreover, are split between the two territories and frequently travel from one side to the other. At official level, dialogue is non-existent. The government of Tiraspol blames Moldova for all its ills and such propaganda is echoed in Trans-Dniester's media, which is virtually 100% state-controlled.

A thaw in the relations between trade unions seemed unfeasible until recently. The outbreak of war between the Trans-Dniestrans region and the rest of Moldova in 1992 had led to a rapid deterioration in the relations between the unions from the two camps. Dialogue was not renewed at the end of the war. The Federation of Trans-Dniestrian Trade Unions dates back to 1990. It is tolerated by the secessionist regime as long as it does not disrupt the government's dictatorial management of the territory.

TRADE UNIONS BREAK THE ICE

The ICFTU assisted in initiating a renewal of the dialogue between trade unions on the two sides. In 2003, it sponsored a joint seminar for the executive members of the FST and the CSRM (affiliated to the ICFTU), which was also attended by leaders of the branch unions. *"It was our first official meeting at this level since the division,"* underlines Vsevolod Barbaneagra, Vice President of the CSRM. *"The atmosphere among us gradually improved and a cooperation agreement was finally concluded between the Federation and the CSRM. Since then, we have invited them to events organised by the CSRM and they occasionally ask us for assistance in organising seminars in Trans-Dniester."*

The support of an organisation like the ICFTU has proved very useful in con-

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Trans-Dniester at a glance

The self-proclaimed republic of Trans-Dniester is a small territory of 4000 km² stretching the length of the eastern border of Moldova, between the Dniester River and the border with Ukraine. It has approximately 700,000 inhabitants.

In June 1990, the national parliament's decision that Moldovan (very similar to Romanian) was to become the only official language in Moldova met with an open show of discontent from the Russian and Ukrainian minorities in the country. The opposition was most virulent in Trans-Dniester, where most of the inhabitants' native language is Russian or

Ukrainian, and was fuelled by fears of a possible reunification of Moldova with Romania. In a referendum held in December 1991, Trans-Dniester's population ratified its support for the territory's independence. In 1992, a civil war broke out between the Moldovan army and the Russian-speakers of Trans-Dniester, who were backed by the 14th Russian army permanently stationed on the territory. Hundreds were killed.

The war led, in autumn of 1992, to an agreement between the Moldovan president, Mircea Snegur, and the then Russian president, Boris Yeltsin. Russia ceased supporting Trans-Dniester and (officially) became neutral. Trans-Dniester obtained the

status of an autonomous region within Moldova. In practice, however, the boundaries of this autonomy have been pushed to extremes: the Moldovan government no longer has any control over Trans-Dniester. The breakaway territory has its own Constitution, currency, flag, national anthem, alphabet (Cyrillic), its own president, government, parliament and army (although the Russian army is still stationed there). Yet not one country has recognised the independence of Trans-Dniester. The political situation in Trans-Dniester is fertile ground for the development of all types of trafficking (arms, drugs, money laundering, prostitution, etc.).

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vincing the unions from both sides to re-new dialogue, thanks, among other things, to the FST's desire to establish international relations. *"Before we got involved, no one was interested in this problem, there was no international support,"* explained Sergejus Glovackas, ICFTU coordinator in the region. *"Since the agreement was signed, we have been working to increase the size of the Moldovan delegations invited to international meetings, extending them to include representatives from Trans-Dniester."* International support is also increasing the FST's prestige in Trans-Dniester, a region desperately trying to establish international contacts, which remain virtually non-existent given that its independence has never been recognised. The FST has thus managed to build up more international relations than the government of Trans-Dniester. *"It is essential that we pursue this opening, as we are playing a pioneering diplomatic role,"* underlines Sergejus Glovackas. *"Last June, we organised a two-day conference, one day of which was held on the Moldovan side and the other in Trans-Dniester, with the support of the Belgian confederation CGSLB (affiliated to the ICFTU) and the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are planning to hold other events of this kind."*

NOSTALGIA FOR THE FORMER-USSR

The workings of the CSRSM and the FST nonetheless remain fundamentally different. Whilst the CSRSM has adopted democratic structures, the FST continues to function in an old-fashioned way. There is still, in fact, a large degree of nostalgia for the former USSR in the self-proclaimed republic. Nationalist propaganda slogans in the streets of the capital, Tiraspol, the statues of Lenin, the Soviet-style uniforms of the police and customs officers, the ultra-authoritarian style of government, the lies channelled through the official media... Many see Trans-Dniester as an enclave living in the past, a vestige of the Soviet era.

So where do the workers stand amid all this? As in Moldova, many were quick to head abroad following the post-war economic collapse and factory closures. The FST has consequently lost half of its members since it was founded. *"150,000 workers have left Trans-Dniester,"* underlines Vladimir Sokhin, President of the FST. *"They are a great help to those staying behind, thanks to the money they send home. Officially, the number of people unemployed is 3000, but the reality is very different, as many of the jobless do not register with the unemployment bureau, choosing to find their own means of survival instead. As trade unionists, the main problem we have to deal with is wage arrears, although there has re-*

cently been some improvement in the situation. In the private sector, wages are paid around two months in arrears, but it is far worse in the public sector."

During the Soviet era, Moscow promoted the industrialisation of Moldova's eastern region. *"Trans-Dniester accounts for 19% of Moldova's population, 15% of its territory and 43% of its industry,"* points out Vsevolod Barbaneagra. Privatisation in Trans-Dniester was embarked upon only recently and, according to the FST, a third of all jobs have been lost in the process. A large portion of the national enterprises has been bought up by the Sheriff group, which is controlled by Trans-Dniester's President, Igor Smirnov. But the trade unions of Trans-Dniester are well aware that if they want to remain in existence they had better refrain from making any critical remarks about this process: the repressive apparatus of the former Soviet Union remains firmly in place in the self-proclaimed republic and is capable of prohibiting the very existence of the FST at any moment.

Trans-Dniester's trade unionists are currently counting on their burgeoning international ties to help them learn from the experiences of other trade unions in the region that have also been confronted with privatisations, including the CSRSM. ●

"We are fighting so that those who stay can live in a civilised State"

Although the Trans-Dniestrian authorities tolerate the FST's existence, they are much more repressive towards anyone who actively attempts to defend workers' rights and interests. Anatol Frunza and Ecaterina Lobaciova have experienced this first hand. They are both leaders of small traders' unions, Anatol in the Tiraspol region and Ecaterina in the Bandery region. They are trying to unite all the small traders' unions in Trans-Dniester, but find themselves confronted with all kinds of harassment from representatives of the ruling authorities, including arrests, threats and seizures, etc. Ecaterina Lobaciova gives us an example: *"In March 2005, two weeks after a conference on the unification of Trans-Dniester's small traders' unions, one of our union officers, Alexandru Dracevshi, was arrested. He was falsely accused of theft, then, for lack of evidence, was accused of bribery, also without the slightest piece of evidence. I wrote to several levels of the judicial authorities to*

protest his innocence. He was released after six days but the investigation is still underway."

The bulk of the products sold by Trans-Dniester's traders have to be "imported" from Moldova or other countries, and have to go through the customs of the self-proclaimed republic. The traders dread this operation; they can never be sure of the reaction of the customs officials, whose moods can swing according to the value of the "gifts" they receive. Regardless of the precautions taken to respect the regulations, the customs officials and other representatives of the Trans-Dniestrian authorities often use the accusation of contraband to receive bribes and repress those trying to assert their rights. *"We had asked our members to affix a sticker to their shop windows saying 'Workers' rights are defended by the union',"* explains Anatol Frunza. *"Representatives of the local authorities sought them out, threatening to accuse them of importing contraband and confiscate their merchandise at the border."*

Anatol Frunza has himself been the target of such repression. *"On 18*

January 2005, customs officials seized my car and the goods intended for the shop run by my wife, who was also there, under the pretext that I was transporting contraband. It was a lie. Their aim was to intimidate me. I took out legal proceedings against them and actually won, which has helped in convincing more independent traders to join us (my car has still not been returned to me, however, as they have appealed against the ruling)." In spite of such harassment, Anatol and Ecaterina have not given up the fight to defend small traders. "I spend a lot of time on the phone, advising our members," explains Ecaterina Lobaciova. "One of their main problems is the harassment they have to contend with from agents of the State (police, fire brigade, etc.). We write frequent letters to the heads of these services to urge them to stop such practices. They have to understand: most of the adults that are fit to work have left Trans-Dniester. We are fighting so that those who stay can live in a civilised state. We would like to be respected for waging this struggle, not be subjected to such pressure."

The immigration haemorrhage

Almost half of Moldova's active population has left the country to work abroad. Added together, the sum of money these migrant workers send back to their families surpasses the total State budget. Behind this record-level migration lie major social adversities.

A minimum monthly salary of 200 lei (13 euros) in the public sector. An average monthly salary of 83 euros nationally. A land privatisation process that has only distributed one or two hectares per household. And, just a few hundred kilometres away, countries where a well-established Moldovan diaspora helps other Moldovans to find much better paid jobs than at home. These are just some of the factors behind the fact that Moldova has one of the highest migration rates in the world. Between 600,000 and a million Moldovans, out of a population of around 3.38 million, have left the country to work abroad.

The older workers generally head for Russia and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine. They speak the Russian language and had already grown accustomed, during the Soviet era, to migrating to the Moscow region to work as seasonal labourers in construction, services or agriculture. Some 300,000 Moldovans currently work in Russia, generally for periods of 3 to 4 months. The younger Moldovans head towards the countries of Western Europe for longer periods. Italy welcomes the largest share, some 150,000 Moldovan migrants. The similarity between the two languages perhaps explains this preference for Italy, where Moldovans often work as carers, looking after the elderly or infirmed, or as domestics. Next in line are Portugal, Greece, Spain, Turkey, etc.

COMMUNIST STRATEGY?

The Moldovan government is doing nothing to reduce the number of workers leaving the country. It is well aware that with the unfavourable investment climate in the country these hundreds and thousands of migrants are not likely to find jobs in the near future. It is thus able to rid itself of the bulk of dissatisfied citizens... and is in no hurry to see them back: the ruling communist party's electoral base is formed of older or uneducated voters – those less likely to leave the country. *"Many of the young people working abroad call their parents during the electoral period to urge them not to vote for the communists... but the older*

members of the population remember the time when medical care was free and living standards were better," explains Vsevolod Barbaneagra, Vice President of the CSRM. *"They also see that the welfare system has improved a little since the communists returned to power. This improvement is not, in fact, thanks to the government, but to the money sent back by migrant workers, which has boosted consumer spending and the tax revenues collected by the government!"* Over two thirds of the State budget comes from customs duty revenues, which have seen a substantial increase as more consumer goods are imported thanks to the money sent back by migrants.

The Moldovan authorities are trying to conclude agreements with the migrants' host countries, so that they enter these countries legally and benefit from the rights provided for by law. To date, only Italy has responded positively to this request for an agreement; however, it only applies, to 2000 workers. The rest just have to get by as best they can. Departures to western countries are often organised by "tourism agencies". For Italy, the cost of the "bus ticket, documents and visa" package varies between 2500 and 2800 euros, bribes included. It is 4500 euros for Ireland, a more distant destination and, above all, riskier in terms of arrests. *"Eight percent of the migrants are sure that they will find a job in the host country, as they have friends and neighbours there. They wouldn't risk paying so much money if they did not have this assurance,"* insists Valeriu Mosneaga, a political scientist specialising in migration issues. The migration costs are much lower for Russia, where a visa is not required.

The desire to migrate is fed by the success stories of migrants earning 300 to 350 euros a month in Russia, and up to 1000 euros (12 times the average salary in Moldova) in countries like Italy. Most of them are also aware that their dream can turn into a nightmare, that tens of thousands of Moldovans are ruthlessly exploited in the host countries. Some fall into the hands of trafficking networks that use them as slave labour in prostitution rings or the construction industry... Others find themselves in situations that are less grave, but their rights are nonetheless flouted. The CSRM, an ICFTU affiliate, is seeking to help migrants by cooperating with unions in the main host countries. Vsevolod Barbaneagra: *"We have contacted these unions, but it hasn't yet led to any solid results, except with the Italian union, CISL, which would really like to cooperate with us. We have drawn up a project covering several areas: research into the Italian labour market to identify where there are shortages; training (language,*

qualifications, etc.); legalisation of migrants' status; etc. We have submitted this project to the European Commission for financing, but it has already been rejected on two occasions. We are involved in other types of bilateral cooperation with Greek and Russian unions, for example, but it is not geared towards providing concrete help for migrants."

NEGLECTED CHILDREN

Migration impacts negatively on family life and children's upbringing. *"Many divorces are caused by the long separations,"* explains Vsevolod Barbaneagra. *"We are also concerned for the plight of so many children growing up without their parents, who have migrated. They live with their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, their neighbours or other persons. They may have more opportunities thanks to the money sent back by their parents, but they are seriously deprived of parental love. I have seen many migrants' children with sadness in their eyes."* UNICEF estimates that some 23,000 children live in Moldova without their two parents, because they are working abroad. The fact that some children receive money from parents working abroad whilst others do not gives rise to huge inequalities between children in the same village or school. The director of a school in the village of Pirlita, in the west of Moldova, is highly concerned about this development: *"Some migrants' children are nonchalant at school; they no longer feel the need to make an effort, as they have grown accustomed to receiving money from their migrant parents, come what may. Our teachers do the best they can to educate them, but we can never make up for the lack of parental guidance."*

It is estimated that migrant workers send at least 850 million euros to Moldova. Most of this money is spent on improving living standards through the purchase of consumer goods (clothes, food, etc.). Valeriu Mosneaga: *"Research shows that aside from this type of spending, between 12 and 15% of the money is saved, and between 6 to 10% is invested, but mainly in the service sector (opening of cafés, restaurants, etc.) rather than in industry. People are reticent to invest in industry, because they have to wait much longer for a return on the investment, because there is so much red tape, and because there is not a stable legal framework to guarantee that the rules of the game will be respected."*

The money being sent back by Moldovan migrants is giving rise to spectacular price inflation, particularly in the capital, Chisinau. *"In Western Europe, given the statistics about our country, many people think that we are dying of*

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hunger, whereas you can see many Mercedes here and price inflation in many areas... owing to the pressure created by the money sent from abroad," remarks Dumitru Daicov, president of the Democratic Party of Moldova (member of the opposition). The pressure is greatest on the real estate sector: *"Two years ago, in Chisinau, a one-bedroom apartment cost between 4000 and 7000 dollars. Now, you need at least 15000 or more,"* underlines Valeriu Mosneaga. As a result, many young Moldovans are not able to buy an apartment, which encourages even more migration.

Migration is also giving rise to labour shortages in a whole range of sectors. Welders, masons, carpenters and tractor drivers, for example, are hard to come by in Moldova. In September, the government recognised that the academic year was commencing with a deficit of at least 2000 teachers in Moldova's schools. According to the teachers' union affiliated to the CSRM, between 1500 and 4000 teachers leave Moldova every year. School heads have to call on retired teachers, university students or any other educated individual to give classes. The impact of this deficit is most strongly felt in rural areas, which

very few teachers are prepared to move to, despite the higher wages. *"Teachers coming to work in Ungheni earn 20% more,"* explains a schoolteacher from this village on the border with Romania. *"This means that instead of earning 30 euros a month, a teacher just entering the profession earns 36 euros a month... but three times that amount is needed to live decently in this country. So it's not this symbolic bonus that is going to attract teachers from the capital, Chisinau... and it is certainly not the type of wage that would bring back the dozens of colleagues who left my school some ten years ago to work abroad!"* ●

Educational crisis leads to a surge of child labour

The situation of Moldova's children has seriously deteriorated since its independence in 1991. Prior to then, although it was not unusual for them to carry out certain tasks, especially in agriculture, the aim of giving them such work was first and foremost educational. The economic collapse that has turned Moldova into one of the poorest countries in Europe has radically changed the way of life. Many families have lost sight of education's importance for the future of their children (and the country) and are pushing them into paid work. Although there are no reliable statistics on the number of working children, according to ILO estimates a tenth of all school-age children have never attended school.

Aside from the growing poverty that is driving some parents to force their children to work, in order to contribute to the household income, there are several other factors behind this negative trend. One of them is the sharp decline in educational standards resulting from the terrible shortage of teachers (see article on page 7). The lack of opportunities for youngsters completing their education is also discouraging some families from sending their children to school.

The cost of schooling is another obstacle. Matriculation with a State school and the attendance of classes are officially free, but parents have to pay for books and stationary, etc. *"And then, although it's not official, money has to be paid to receive more attention from the teachers in some schools,"* explains Olga Stratulat, of the employment institute. The situation varies widely from one school to another. In certain establishments, the directors do all they can to encourage the schooling of the poorest children, inviting, for example, the better-off families to donate clothes for the poorer children, to relieve them of the stigma of being less well dressed. Moldovan trade unions have also organised initiatives of this kind.



According to Moldovan law, schooling is compulsory until the age of 15, but the local authorities' reaction to non-attendance varies widely from one area to another. Harvesting time, which stretches from September to October, is a critical factor behind school abandonment. Children often have to spend their days working in the fields rather than at school, particularly those whose parents have left to find work abroad. After the harvest, it is difficult for them to catch up even if they return to school.

Another danger to which Moldovan children are exposed is trafficking. Russia, the Balkan countries, Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, the European Union, are the main destinations of the children falling victim to trafficking. In some instances, Moldovan girls aged just 12 or 13 are forced into prostitution by traffickers.

The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is carrying out numerous initiatives in Moldova to fight against the worst forms of child labour, including trafficking. Two of these initiatives involve trade unions. *"One is aimed at train-*

ing transport, education and health workers' unions to devise and implement action programmes against child labour," explains Viorica Ghimpu, director of the IPEC programme in Moldova. *"The other is aimed at concluding a nationwide collective agreement banning child labour, in collaboration with employers. Moldova's unions are equipped with many competent people and have the power to take action, all they require is some specific training on child labour to be able to carry out effective initiatives in the area. We want to help them at this level."* ●

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