

The blind spot of Europe



More and more people from the Republic of Moldova seek asylum in Germany, but the chances of being recognized are minimum. Why do the Moldovans leave their houses? A trip to a torn country.

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În Grozești, Republic of Moldova, Valeriu Butnaru, the 60-year old locksmith is alone in his house and workshop. There are three land plots around the house.

The weeds grow, the shutters grind with every wind blow. Everyone has left: children, young people, and families.

They all jostle in Western Berlin in a reused industrial house. The lots in the shelter on Paulsternstraße are separated with curtains. Every twelfth comes from the Republic of Moldova. In the first half of the year, 1608 people came to Germany – twice as many as in the same period of last year. Even more people are asylum seekers – 1780 in total.

As compared to one million asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and other countries, the figure does not seem to be very high. But the small country Moldova with 3.6 million inhabitants is facing a tendency: thousands of people are abandoning their country from the Eastern garden of the European Union.

BERLIN, PAULSTERNSTRASSE

This is true for Victor, blond, 32, Russian-speaker and his colleague Natalia. They came with their families and are worried about the decision on the asylum. Because, they have been constantly rejected so far. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bamf) said NO 1040 times to the asylum seekers from the Republic of Moldova in January-July. Only two asylum seekers received positive answers. So, the share of positive answers is 0.1%. Victor was responsible for security in a foodstuff company. One day, one of his colleagues died in a work accident. Victor informed his manager and the police. Nothing happened. No investigation. No consequence. He chose to leave. Natalia is the victim of a huge bank scandal. She kept her money at the state company Banca de Economii, 5000 Euros in total. One year ago, this bank went bankrupt and her money vanished.

She was not offered any solution in Moldova, did not benefit from the state insurance of deposits. The former Prime Minister is accused of the theft of one billion dollars from this bank and from other commercial banks. In October he was arrested. According to the corruption index developed by Transparency International, the Republic of Moldova is on the 103rd position out of 168. We must add a frozen conflict here: Moldova is divided in the Western part, where the Romanian language is spoken and people want to join the EU and the Eastern part where Russian is predominantly spoken: Transnistria, that declared itself an autonomous republic, acknowledged only by Russia. The region is isolated from the international point of view. In 1992, there was a war between

the two parts. After 1992, no violent actions have been recorded. The citizens of the Republic of Moldova are allowed to travel to the EU without visas since 2014. The Transnistrians want to join the Russian Federation. At the end of May, the US army sent soldiers to Moldova for a maneuver in response to Putin's aggression in Eastern Ukraine. At the NATO Summit held in Warsaw in July, it was decided that it is appropriate to send more troops to Eastern Europe. At the shelter, Victor tells us that he did not run because of the policy of the Chancellor Angela Merkel. Natalia has relatives in Germany. In April they searched on the Internet, translated the information with Google Translate. They rented a van and told the driver: "Berlin, Turmstraße please". It is the address of the initial reception of refugees. We made this trip on our own and continued the new wave of migration.

MOLDOVA, IN NISPORENI DISTRICT

In Grozești village, almost everyone lives on the money that is sent by relatives from abroad. This is true for Valeriu Butnaru, who has a son in Germany. The latter works in a car service, in Munich region. His second son lives with his wife and children in the neighborhood. Not all the houses are destroyed here. There are also noble houses with finished façade and a garden.

Butnaru has a dream: he wants to build a new workshop and launch, with his sons, a repair business with his own money, without credits and, especially, without politicians: "they are thieves".

Butnaru pays taxes like all the local residents. But the money does not come back to the village, for the public infrastructure, for example: the street in front of his house is full of mud. The toilet is in the garden – a wooden box almost overthrown by the wind.

Until recently, he used to go out with the tractor three times

a month to bring drinking water. In Nisporeni district, there are wells, but the water is polluted with toxic substances and heavy metals. Things are easier for Butnaru now since the end of July: a new system of drinking water with network has been built with Austrian and EU funds. Now, about 16,000 people have fresh drinking water in their taps.

“This refers, in essence, to treating the reason for the refuge, because life in the village becomes more tolerable and can enhance the economic activity”, says the Project Coordinator Gerhard Schaumberger from the Austrian Development Agency.

NISPORENI TOWN IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION

The water from the building of the Nisporeni district administration still smells like rotten eggs. It contains hydrogen sulphate, a colorless gas.

The President of the district Ion Artene has his office here. There are three small flags on his table – Nisporeni, Moldova, EU. He says that the district and the member communities have also participated in the water project. In addition, every owner had to pay 5000 lei (about 230 Euros) for connection.

Ion Artene speaks about economic development, “local business”. But where are the asphalted streets that businesses need urgently? Where is the sewerage system? The president of the district raises his shoulders: “I am in this position for only one year.” What about corruption? Artene says that there may be some problems with the “Police and justice”.

At the beginning of the year, most asylum seekers from the Republic of Moldova are from Nisporeni. Why? Ion says that there is no persecution and he has not heard of people who facilitate trafficking to Berlin. His assumption is: “They are looking for a better life in Germany.”

**CHIȘINĂU, CAPITAL OF MOLDOVA,
STATE BUREAU FOR MIGRATION AND ASYLUM**

Maybe we get some help from a state representative who is involved in this issue. Iulian Popov, Button-Down shirt, is the director of the Bureau for Asylum and is the person who takes the decision about the stay of foreign citizens in the Republic of Moldova. He has a world map in the office. He leaves his door open and all the employees do the same. There is no queue here anyway. First, Popov makes a tea, pours hot water in the cups until the water reaches the margins. He jumps, brings a napkin and removes the stain.

Popov has statistics: how many Moldovans sought asylum in other countries: 980 in 2014. Of them, 122 received positive reply. In line with the Geneva Convention, the asylum can be obtained by people who are discriminated because of race, religion, nationality or membership to a social group, as well as in case of political persecution.

Is there persecution in the Republic of Moldova? Popov says: "As a country of origin, we don't have the right to speculate on the reasons of our citizens' refuge." But it is possible that not everyone knows what a refugee is: this creates misunderstanding."

We see very quickly that Popov does not want to talk about the negative aspects of the existence in the country where he works as a civil servant.

**CHIȘINĂU, CAPITAL OF MOLDOVA,
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION**

Ghenadie Crețu is not bound by a civil servant's behavior. He works for the International Organization of Migration (IOM), which is an inter-state organization that supports refugees and people returning to the country. He calls the recent emigration of Moldovans "economic migration". "Many of those who were blocked in Europe, without a job and money seek

asylum.”

Crețu does not see the Transnistrian conflict as a reason for seeking asylum: “There is no war there.”

Since the beginning of June – after two years of peace – the parties to the conflict talk to each other. The representatives of Moldova and Transnistria met in Berlin with the mediation of German diplomats. Germany took over the leadership of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) this year; in July, Frank-Walter Steinmeier travelled to the region one more time.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, member of the SPD announced small progresses: the mutual acknowledgement of the registration plates and of the graduation diplomas.

Steinmeier warned that, because of the NATO troops, there may be a war against Russia in Eastern Europe. Transnistria is important, because this is, in fact, a conflict between Moldova and Russia. President Putin sees Transnistria as a buffer zone to the European Union and NATO.

Many diplomats know that the successful negotiations in Transnistria will serve as an example to other frozen conflicts, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia or Eastern Ukraine. Beside Moldova and Transnistria, the EU and USA take part as observers in the so-called discussions in the 5+2 format. Russia and Ukraine have the role of mediators. The fact that these two rivals sit at the same table can be called a success, because the peace plans Minsk I and II are still not functioning for Ukraine.

Steinmeier formulated the goal of negotiations at the beginning of the year: sovereignty and territorial integrity for the Republic of Moldova, a special status for Transnistria. This is in theory. Basically, we are far from a viable solution.

Thus, Moldovans are not afraid only of Putin's influence, but also of the fact that the Gagauz, a Turkish people settled down in the Southern part of the country will solicit more autonomy. At the end of July, Transnistria rejected the special status suggested by OSCE. The President of the Supreme Council refers to a referendum held in 2006, when the participants clearly expressed their wish that Transnistria be part of Russia.

The refugees do not have any role in this conflict.

CHIȘINĂU, CAPITAL OF MOLDOVA, A SHELTER FOR THE ASYLUM SEEKERS

Currently, there is one refugee from Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova: Sergej Ilcenco. The journalist in a grey T-shirt, blue jeans and with a beard has lived for one year in a shelter of the UN Agency for Refugees. He shares the room with two persons and has three kittens in a carton box. There are only 14 residents in the whole shelter, including 4 Syrians – the flow of refugees of the last year brought them close to Moldova.

The case of Sergej Ilcenco is an important piece of evidence for the Republic of Moldova: the situation on the left bank of Nistru is serious. Almost dramatic.

This is what Ilcenco also felt. He stayed for two months in a Transnistrian prison, because he incited to a so-called "armed revolt against the legal and lawfully elected authority". This is what a document of the KGB says – the Transnistrian secret service still keeps the name of the Soviet model. Ilcenco says that this statement was "completely fabricated". He never wrote this text on the blog, as he was accused. His asthma and heart condition worsened while he was in the prison.

To the civil servant Iulian Popov, Ilcenco's case shows that "it is likely that there is a risk of torture and deprivation of liberty in Transnistria".

But are the facts seen the same in the self-declared Republic?

TRANSNISTRIA, CAPITAL TIRASPOL

In the Tiraspol capital, the soldiers' monuments remind about the war with Moldova. The state coat of arms displayed on a number of boards, still contains the communist symbols: a red star, a hammer, a sickle and a crown with ears.

In a pizzeria we meet Ekaterina Lipovcenko, opponent of the regime. She looks nervously at the street. Her son, Alexandru, has been staying in a detention center in Tiraspol for one year. His cell, 24 square meters, is shared with eight people. At the end of March, the court found him guilty for extremist activities and he was imprisoned for three years and a half. Previously, he wrote on Facebook: "the order in Transnistria can be restored with the help of American soldiers".

This internationally isolated regime is not afraid of anything, but an intervention from the outside. The head of the Government, Pavel Prokudin raised Steinmeier's picture at the end of July and talked about a "clink of swords" at the borders of Transnistria.

Oleksandr Lipovcenko contested the KGB statement, started the hunger strike and got hepatitis. The guards beat him. "He barely could walk, lost weight and his body was covered with bruises", the mother's boy describes the condition he was in.

His mother, Ekaterina Lipovcenko, wrote letters to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. She was asking for help. She hasn't received an answer so far. The OSCE wrote that the branch from the Republic of Moldova is responsible for certain incidents. But the correspondence must remain confidential.

CHIȘINĂU, CAPITAL OF MOLDOVA, AT A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

Ion Manole is nervous. He is a legal expert, activist and director of the non-governmental organization Promo-Lex. He considers that Transnistria is a "black spot" in terms of Human rights and the OSCE "does not do anything to combat this for years".

Manole collects information on cases of human rights violation. If the inhabitants of Transnistria want to seek asylum abroad, they will need his services. Later, he transmits documents: "only for those who are really persecuted". There is a shelf in his office with many case files on it.

Ion Manole and his colleagues are not allowed to travel to Transnistria for one year to get information on their clients there; an investigation on them has been initiated there. The accusation has been made public by the KGB: Promo-Lex was discredited because it has never addressed in Moldova the subject of Ukrainian nationalists or the violation of human rights in the USA. On the other hand, its activity is said to be the "methodical, destructive and hostile" organization of activities against the Transnistrian Republic.

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The Council of Europe is “concerned” and warned about the consequences at the end of June: the international actors had to immediately create an “emergency mission” to Moldova. There was a clear requirement to the OSCE: the main mission to Moldova must also take into consideration the human rights, according to its mandate. But nothing happened so far.

Upon request, the OSCE mission to Moldova, the OSCE secretariat in Vienna, as well as the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs transmit the correspondence one to another. Finally, an OSCE representative declared in 2016, in written form: “The discussion about the individual violation of human rights is not part of the 5+2 agenda”. However, there is a group of experts on this subject.

How accurately the violations of human rights in Transnistria are recorded is demonstrated by another destiny the OSCE was informed about.

CHISINAU, CAPITAL OF MOLDOVA, THE BUSINESSWOMAN ALA GHERMAN

This case ruins the life of Ala Gherman. The 53-year old woman sits in the center of her office, surrounded by files with documents and piles of papers on the floor. “Vitali, Vitali”, she shouts, as though these papers could bring him back. Thousands of pages with evidence that her brother Vitali Eriomenko is innocent. Evidence that nobody wants to take into consideration.

The 47-year old man had a food manufacturing company in Slobozia, a Transnistrian community. When the business became profitable, the problems started. He was accused of tax evasion. The fact that neither the auditors nor the Tax Department confirmed this was not important for the Transnistrian secret services or for the law enforcement authorities. On March 29, 2011, Eriomenko was handcuffed. The process was discussed 18 times. He was sent to jail for 12 years.

His wife and three children migrated, and the 400 employees were dismissed. An empire was destroyed. Eriomenko's house was vandalized.

Ala Gherman opens a file on the computer. In spring, after five years, she secretly managed to take pictures of her brother's house. The windows are broken, the cupboards are empty. A cut out teddy duck. Worms moving on the floor.

She shows a picture made in 2013. The radiography of Vitalie's teeth. We see six holes. "He has no teeth anymore". The woman's brother has problems with the heart, stomach and intestines. "I would pay for the surgery", says Gherman, who is a businesswoman and produces dry fruit in Chisinau, "but they don't allow me".

Ala Gherman wrote to OSCE, again and again. Her parents also addressed to the mission. They still have not received a reply.

OSCE claims that it has not found letters from the human rights activists. "The messages were looked for in the corresponding electronic file", the spokesperson of the OSCE presidency in Germany stated.

BERLIN, FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

At the beginning of July, the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs invites to a conference: "OSCE as an agent". In a

panel, there is the German special representative who participates in the Transnistrian negotiations, Cord Meier-Klodt. In front of him, an illustrator draws small pictures on a whiteboard. A turtle, a snowman, a squirrel. It is the content of the conference that must not be seen outside. I cannot transmit authorized quotations from the conference nor the interview with the special representative.

Later, Ion Manole from Promo-Lex writes on Facebook: he had the impression that only in Moldova can it occur that OSCE blocks the news. "If Germany and OSCE had an adequate policy in Transnistria, there would be fewer refugees".

The Swedish journalist Nils Resare tried to get an interview from OSCE, from the main mission with the headquarters in Chişinău. His subject: Transnistrian negotiations and the "situation of victims of torture". At the end of June he received a reply: "we cannot talk to you about cases of torture, so, if you don't mind, we will not touch upon this subject".

So, is it better to hide the violation of human rights? Even the Federation Institution for Migration and Refugees talks openly about "tortures" in Transnistria.

OSCE has a problem. It is an entity one of the parties to the conflict is in: Russia. The Transnistrian negotiations "must be supported only by the 57 OSCE member states through consensus", said the spokesperson of the OSCE presidency from Germany. The OSCE problem is also a problem of Steinmeier until the end of the year.

But nobody sees this: Steinmeier doesn't want confrontations with Russia. When he has public meetings in Transnistria, he doesn't talk about the violation of human rights. The Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs highlights that Steinmeier, during his business trips, "always" addresses relevant subjects – "which includes the violation of human rights".

BERLIN, PAULSTERNSTRASSE

July 21 is for Natalia at the shelter for refugees a day when all her hopes vanish. She received the rejection letter: her family and she will have to return to Moldova. Victor received the same decision one month ago.

Natalia doesn't know what will happen. She has no money or job. She has no future.