Bulgarians

Profile

Bulgarians live in the rural south of Moldova; 65,662 according to the 2004 census. Some 79 per cent of Moldovan Bulgarians claim Bulgarian as their first language, and 68 per cent identify Russian as their second language.

Historical context

Like the Gagauz, Bulgarians arrived in Bessarabia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries seeking refuge from Ottoman persecution. Bulgarian immigration was also encouraged by co-religionist Russia. Subsequently, many assimilated to Russian culture and the rest became highly Russified. The recorded numbers of Bulgarians in Moldova fell from some 177,000 at the time of the formation of the MASSR in 1940 to 88,000 in 1989. From the late 1980s, Moldovan Bulgarians established links to Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian minority in Moldova has been the subject of bilateral cooperation between Bulgaria and Moldova.

In January 1999 Bulgarians in the Moldovan district of Taraclia, where about half of Moldova's Bulgarian population resides, voted in an illegal referendum to protest against proposed administrative boundary changes. The changes would have abolished Taraclia district (a Soviet-era raion) and attached the area to neighbouring Cahul county, in the process transforming the Bulgarian population from a two-thirds local majority to a minority of 16 per cent. The principal fear of local Bulgarians was that they would lose state subsidies for Bulgarian language tuition in the district if they no longer comprised a local majority. The result was a 92 per cent vote against the boundary change, indicating that local Moldovans had voted with the Bulgarian population against the changes, reportedly due to the proposed move of some social services out of Taraclia to Cahul. Taraclia's population then boycotted local elections in May 1999, and Bulgarians in local administration refused to relinquish posts officially abolished under the territorial reform.

The outcome of the dispute was, however, peaceful. After quiet intercession from Bulgaria and Ukraine (with its own compact Bulgarian minority in Odessa region), on 22 October 1999 the Moldovan Parliament voted to preserve Taraclia in its current configuration in a vote nonetheless polarized along party lines. The retained Taraclia region has no special status, but does constitute a Bulgarian majority region in Moldova.

Current issues

Bulgarian is a language of instruction in schools situated in areas of compact Bulgarian settlement. During a visit to Bulgaria in 2004, President Voronin pledged the establishment of a university for Moldova's Bulgarians.