

Russians and Russian-speakers

Profile

By the 1990s, nearly two-thirds of the Russian population in Moldova consisted of recent migrants or their children, attracted by employment opportunities in industry, especially in Transnistria. Russians were concentrated in urban areas, particularly the capital and Tiraspol, and enjoyed disproportionately high levels of education.

In 1989 more than two-thirds of the entire population of the Moldavian Republic reportedly used Russian as a first or second language. The centrality accorded to Russian ensured that a reactive ethno-linguistic nationalism developed among Russian-speakers - a sociological category embracing Russians, Ukrainians, as well as the Gagauz and Bulgarians, for whom Russian was important as a second language, and Russian-speaking Moldovans, especially in the Transnistria region - in response to efforts to promote Romanian/Moldovan. These groups share a set of common interests - primarily employment in the state sector and education opportunities - built around their knowledge of Russian and threatened by the new language law.

The 2004 census recorded 201,218 ethnic Russians and Russians now comprise Moldova's second largest minority, although the prevalence of a Russian-speaking identity amongst other groups accords the Russian language and identity a more significant role in the republic than numbers alone would suggest. Russian continues to dominate in both print and broadcast media for all ethnic groups in the republic, and the Russian language is commonly heard on the streets of Chisinau, especially among young people.

Historical context

The development of sizeable Russian settlement in the region dates from Russia's annexation of Bessarabia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The rapid urbanization and industrialization of Moldova from the 1950s to the 1980s marked the most significant period for Russian migration to Moldova. Between 1959 and 1989 Russians increased from 292,000 (10.2 per cent of the population) to 562,000 (13 per cent).

The relatively small percentage of Russians in Moldova belies the influence of Russian language and culture, which for almost two centuries played a leading role in Bessarabia and the Transnistria region, especially following Soviet annexation. A Cyrillic script was introduced for the Moldovan language and Russian was taught in all schools. In the postwar period, knowledge of Russian was a necessity for almost all of the adult population. The influx of Russian-speaking settlers further strengthened the position of Russian in the republic.

As fears of Romanianization grew, the Inter-front emerged as the leading political organization of the

Russian-speakers. Russian-speakers were mobilized in this period under internationalist, rather than Russian nationalist, slogans. Russian was accorded the status of official language of interethnic communication in 1989, yet fears of Romanianization were not allayed. In the parliamentary elections of 1994, the Inter-front (renamed Unity and in alliance with the Socialist Party) was second only to the Agrarian Democratic Party and formed an informal coalition with the Agrarians to support legislation that promoted a multiethnic Moldovan national identity.

Unlike the main political organizations representing the Russian-speakers, which were built on Soviet or pro-Soviet institutions, the cultural organizations that have emerged in post-independence Moldova have sought to promote new identities, either an ethnic one (the Russian Cultural Centre) or a Slavic one (the Society of Slavic Letters).

Russian-speakers, including ethnic Russians, comprise a plurality in Transnistria and played a central role in the Transnistrian campaign for separation from Moldova (see entry for Transnistria). Again, resistance to incorporation in the Moldovan state is more related to support for an internationalist nationalities policy, in which Russian would nonetheless play the dominant role, rather than support for ethnic Russian nationalism.

Current issues

Russian-language tuition is available in Moldova from kindergarten to postgraduate levels, a reflection of Russian's historical influence in Moldova and its role as a cultural medium for numerous other groups alongside ethnic Russians. According to reports, the percentage of students in Russian schools significantly exceeds the ethnic Russian proportion of the population at large. In 2003 there were reportedly 276 Russian schools in Moldova, and 93 combined Russian-Moldovan schools, offering Russian-medium tuition to 124,899 students. This accounts for 21 per cent of the school-age population, compared with ethnic Russians' 5.9 per cent of the total population.

Relations between the Moldovan state and Russia remain strained as a result of the Transnistria conflict and attempts by the Russian state to use the conflict for leverage in the region. In February 2005 President Voronin reiterated his rejection of Russian proposals for the federalization of Moldova and for the raising of Russian's status to official language in the republic. However, in Moldova itself the undiminished prominence of Russian in political institutions and the media - and the apparent compliance with this situation among the Moldovan majority - has limited perceptions of discrimination against Russians.

Civic organizations dedicated to ethnic Russians are reportedly few, and cater mainly to elderly populations.