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Demographic problems of the Republic of Moldova

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DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEMS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

ABSTRACT. Almost all European postcommunist countries have experienced a worsening demographic situation since 1989. The Republic of Moldova finds itself in a similar predicament although a complicated internal situation makes demographic conditions much worse than that of the remaining postcommunist countries. There are several reasons which account for this state of affairs: (1) cultural similarity to neighbouring and richer Romania which facilitates emigration of young people; (2) a very bad economic situation which counteracts procreation and increases the mortality rate and emigration; (3) the presence of Russian troops in the Transdnier area which destabilizes the country and discourages potential foreign investors. The bad situation the Republic of Moldova is in may be illustrated by vague population estimates. Officially, the population in 2003 stood at 4.2 million. If the population of the Transdnier area is deducted then the number drops to 3.6 million. Furthermore, if one considers emigration figures concerning those who have left the country to earn their living abroad (not shown by the official statistics) - the final estimate is around 3.3 million.

KEY WORDS: Republic of Moldova, Transdnier area, demographic situation.

INTRODUCTION

Population processes taking place in the Republic of Moldova before the collapse of the communist bloc (including the USSR) were typical of the whole population living in this part of Europe. The total increase of the population (3.0 million in 1960 rose to 4.4 million in 1990) and increase of the population

in towns accompanied by the decrease of the number of people in rural areas (in 1960 urban population was at the level of 22% of the total number whereas in 1990 it reached 47%) may serve as good examples of typical population processes (Şuşu, 2005).

Almost all post-communist European countries have seen changes for the worse after 1989 (cf Eberhardt, 2001; Michalski, 2001). Similar demographic changes have occurred in the Republic of Moldova. Unfortunately, a complicated situation the country is currently in, makes it impossible to establish the factual number of Moldovans. According to unofficial sources about 4.2 million people live in the area of the Republic of Moldova. Official sources claim that 3.6 million citizens live in the part of the country controlled by the government (excluding the Transdnister area). Besides, almost 300 thousand citizens live abroad. That makes the total number of the population somewhere near 3.3 million citizens actually living in the Republic of Moldova governed from Chişinău (Fig. 1).

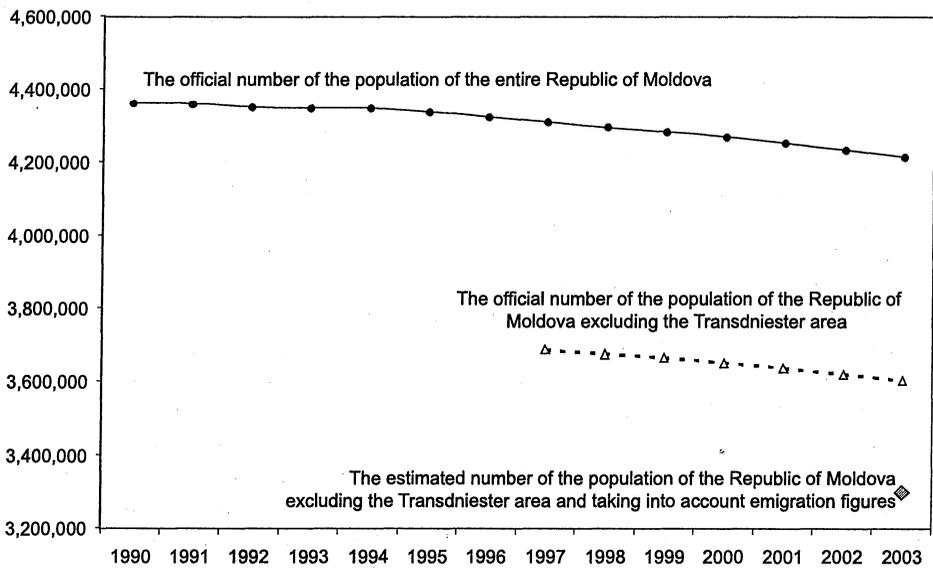


Fig. 1. Different versions of the estimated number of the population of the Republic of Moldova
 Source: Author's own study based on various sources and interviews.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the general demographic situation with a stress put on some negative phenomena observed in the Republic of Moldova. In most cases the illustrative data used in the paper refer to the period up to 1996 inclusive. These cases describe the Republic of Moldova as a whole. The data referring to the period after 1997 describe the part of the country controlled by the government of Chişinău (in this case the name the actual Moldova is used).

CONDITIONS OF THE BAD DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION

The demographic situation of the Republic of Moldova has considerably deteriorated since 1989. It is due to several factors. The first factor lies in the complicated history of Moldova which makes it difficult to see clear state patterns needed while creating concepts of an independent country. Although there was a long period when Moldova was more or less an independent country, the historical reference is not strong enough to consolidate the current vision of a fully sovereign state (cf Sobczyński, 2001). Moreover, the present Republic of Moldova occupies approximately half of the area which, historically speaking, belonged to Moldova. The rest of the territories lies within the borders of Romania (Țurcănașu, 2002). Cultural similarities have also affected the two languages, Moldovan and Romanian, which nowadays show little difference. This is an advantageous aspect making migration much easier.

The second factor stems from a very bad economic situation. Official records show that the gross national product per capita fell from \$1,363 in 1989 to \$ 590 in 2003. Looking for better economic conditions is a tangible incentive encouraging many Moldovans, especially young ones, to emigrate as most of them do not see any bright prospects for Moldovans in their own country.

Another serious disadvantage is a total collapse of the national health service. Formally, health services are free from charge and fully accessible. In practice, all medical services are paid (this information comes from interviews carried out in Balți in May 2005).

The third destructive factor is related to the presence of Russian troops. They left Moldova on April 11th 1997 but the withdrawal refers only to the area controlled by the government in Chișinău. The Transdnister area was to be freed from the troops by January 16th 2002 but they are still stationed there (Sobczyński, 2002). The situation in which the government lacks control over part of the country's territory leads to instability and diminishes investment attractiveness of the area. It is worth pointing out that the second factor tends to overlap the first one. As a result, the negative effects of both factors are combined and intensified.

Religious and national ramifications are not favourable, either (cf Sainsus, 2005). According to the last complete population census conducted in 1989, Moldovans constituted 64% of the society. The remaining part of the population consisted of Ukrainians (14%), Russians (13%) and Gagauzians (3.5%) who live in their own autonomous republic in the south of the country (Anu-raul..., 2004).

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEMOGRAPHICAL SITUATION

As it has already been mentioned in the introduction (Fig. 1) the population of the Republic of Moldova is decreasing. It is typical of all postcommunist European countries. In the case of the Republic of Moldova both the fall in the natural increase of the population and negative net migration balance lead to a decrease in the number of the population.

Fig. 2 shows a fall in the natural increase of the population. The period of 1990 – 1996 refers to the Republic of Moldova as a whole whereas the Transdniester region was not taken into account for the years 1997–2003. A falling tendency is observed throughout the whole analysed period. An increase is noted only for 1997 compared to 1996 which was due to territorial changes in the area controlled by the government in Chişinău. An analysis of the natural increase of the population was carried out for rural and urban population only to show that the situation far from being typical. The natural increase is lower in rural areas (–2.7‰ in 2003) than in cities (–0.5‰). It is due to a higher mortality rate for people living in the countryside (13.9‰ in 2003) in comparison with urban population (9.1‰). Even a higher birth rate for rural areas (11.2‰) than for urban areas cannot make up for the higher mortality rate. Presumably, high density of population in the metropolitan area of Chişinău, where there were almost 780 thousand inhabitants at the beginning of 2004 constituting 22% of the total population, was more favourable for urban demographic situation than for rural demographic situation. Judging from official data the agglomeration actually does not develop, as 10 years ago Chişinău had almost the same number of inhabitants (741 thousand people) as it does today. Other authors' research as well as interviews conducted in Chişinău show that the population of Chişinău is bigger than the number of inhabitants indicated by official sources. For obvious reasons immigrants constitute a significant part of that population.

The distribution of nationalities clearly shows that the population which has lived in Moldova for a long time enjoys a better demographic situation (demographic dynamic rate in 1994 was 1.437 for Moldovans and 1.487 for Gagauzians). A much worse situation is seen among such minorities as Russians (0.726), Ukrainians (0.826) and Bulgarians (1.028). It seems that Russians and Ukrainians share the plight of former colonists in colonies which have become independent (cf Michalski, 2005). They emigrate to the metropolis in great numbers while the rest staying in place is characterised by negative pro-creational patterns. The Jewish minority is hardly noticeable (0.111) as it only consists of older persons. Young Jews have already emigrated to Israel (the process typical of the whole former USSR).

DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEMS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

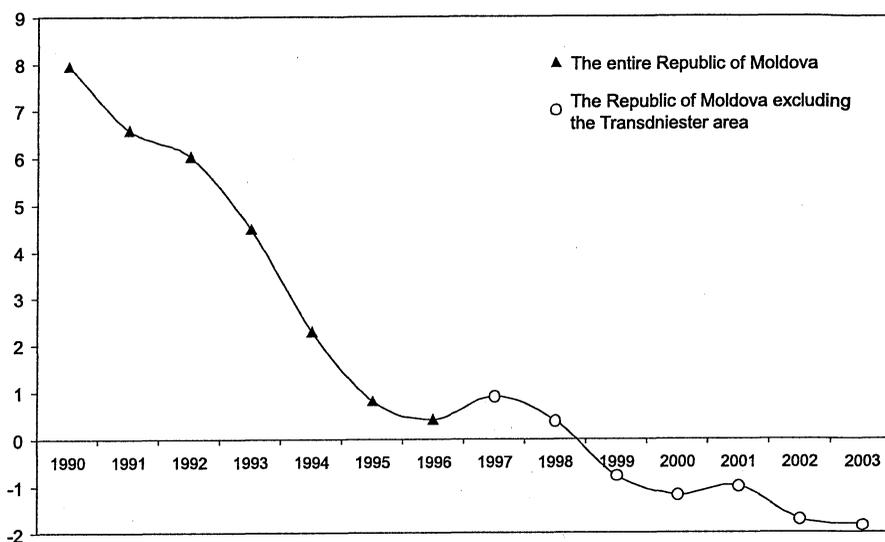
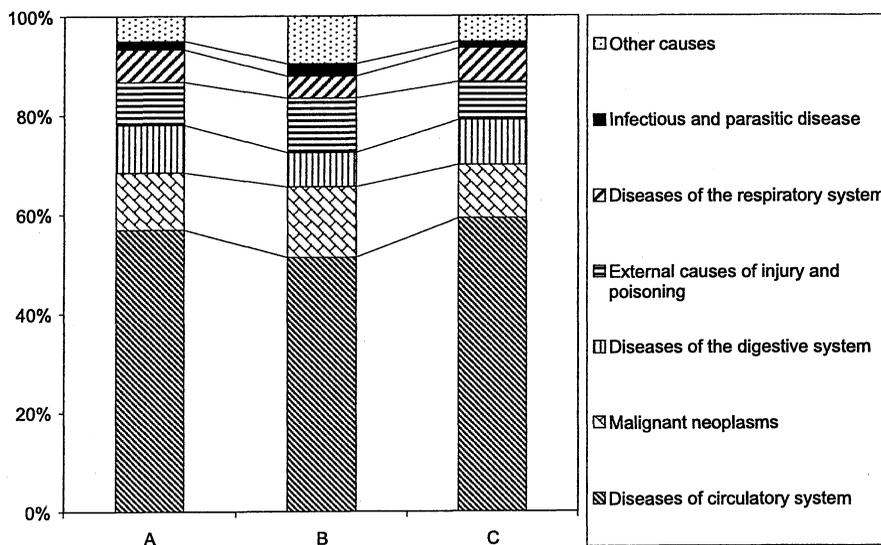


Fig. 2. The natural increase of the population of the Republic of Moldova
 Source: Author's own study based on European Health for all database, 2005.



A – The Republic of Moldova excluding the Transdniester area (crude deaths)
 B – The Transdniester area (crude deaths)
 C – The Republic of Moldova excluding the Transdniester area (SDR)

Fig. 3. The structure of deaths in the Republic of Moldova in 2003

Source: Author's own study based on Anuraul Statistic al Republicii Moldova 2004, 2004; European Health for all database, 2005; Л. А. Чебанова, 2005.

The assessment of the impact of migration on changes in the number of the Moldovan population is much more difficult than that on natural increase in population. The official data of 2003 say that 1,620 people immigrated to the actual Republic of Moldova. This number included: 20% from Ukraine and about 12% respectively from Syria and Turkey. At the same time 7,376 persons emigrated from the Republic of Moldova: 45% of them went to Russia, 23% to Ukraine, 15% to the USA and 10% to Germany. These data show that emigration connected with the independent political past of the country prevailed. Pure economical reasons were less important.

It is symptomatic that officially only 16 persons emigrated to Romania in 2003. Different information comes from the carried out interviews which confirm that at least 300 thousand citizens of the actual Republic of Moldova emigrated to Romania. It is kept secret in order to avoid being robbed by criminals who look for families whose members work abroad, including Romania.

The research into the standardised death rate reveals a very bad situation in the actual Republic of Moldova. SDR (Standardized Death Rate) all causes in 2003 reached the level of 1,446.7 per 100 thousand persons while the same indicator for Poland was 895.5 and 1,126.0 for the neighbouring Romania. Only the Russian Federation had a worse indicator of 1,568.1. Obviously, if crude mortality is analysed the situation in the Republic of Moldova gets slightly better (1,192.6 for the actual Moldova in 2003 and about 1,300.0 for the Transdnister area) which is due to a younger age structure of the population. However, if data related to the predicted actual number of the population in the Republic of Moldova are considered (Fig. 1) then it seems that the reality is even worse than the official statistics. The structure of deaths (Fig. 3) is dominated by deaths caused by diseases of the circulatory system. Surprisingly, the death rate related to malignant neoplasm is low. With widely spread smoking habits and low quality of health services a much higher level of deaths caused by malignant neoplasm might be expected. On the other hand, a high level of infections and parasitic diseases does not contradict expectations. SDR (Standardized Death Rate) of infections and parasitic diseases in the actual Republic of Moldova was 1.4% in 2003 and was close to that of Romania (1.3%) but much higher than the indicator for Poland (0.7%).

Overmortality of men as a demographic phenomenon seems to be very interesting. In theory, the poorer the post-communist country is, the higher overmortality is expected. However, in practice, if we compare the situation in the actual Republic of Moldova with that in Poland we get a confusing picture. In 2002 the early (30–44 years of age) standardised overmortality rate of men in the Republic of Moldova was 285.7%, whereas in Poland it was higher by 19.9%. Similarly, the late (45–59 years of age) standardised overmortality in the actual Republic of Moldova was 200.8% and 260.3 % in Poland.

The infant death rate is also very high in the Republic of Moldova. In 2003 this indicator was 14.3 per 1,000 live births while in Poland it was 7.4. According to official data Romania has the worst infant death rate in Europe (16.7). It is worth remembering that live births are often recorded with a delay of a few days. Thus, a certain number of deaths, especially early neonatal deaths, escape official statistics. This observation is partly confirmed by the percentage of neonatal deaths compared with the total number of infant deaths. In the actual Republic of Moldova the percentage rate was merely 29 points in 2003 while the same year brought approximately 54% in Poland and Finland respectively.

SUMMARY

The population of the Republic of Moldova is subjected to depopulation processes similar to those which occur in most of European countries. There are, however, specific factors which make these processes so intense that they put at risk the future existence of the Moldovan population.

First and foremost, a very bad economic situation is to blame. Economic prospects for the foreseeable future look gloomy mainly because of the Russian troops which are not willing to leave the area. As a result foreign entrepreneurs are discouraged from investing in the Republic of Moldova. Omnipotent corruption and failing economic policies make matters even worse for potential investors. On the other hand cultural similarities to neighbouring richer Romania encourage emigration, particularly of young people.

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