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Moldovan Fever for Romanian Citizenship

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Inhabitants of Moldova have submitted about one million requests for Romanian citizenship to Romanian authorities from the second half of 2006 till April 2007. Romania's official position on this issue points back its promise to facilitate the procedure of granting citizenship, a procedure blocked in 2002. The population of Moldova is 3.8 mln and almost 80% is ethnic Romanian. The hullabaloo around the Romanian citizenship question began long ago, becoming only more contentious when Romania was invited to join the EU. Then, in August 2006, a flood of letters requesting citizenship started arriving in the post boxes of Romanian citizenship authorities; by September, it had reached alarming proportions. At the moment, if the number of posted letters is somewhat reduced, many inhabitants of Moldova are either expecting a response from Bucharest or looking for alternative methods of getting citizenship, such as, for example, marriage of convenience to a Romanian. For many Moldavians, Romanian citizenship means more than just the possibility of free travel to EU countries for the sake of a better standard of living. It also signifies the rehabilitation of the historical injustice committed after 1940, when some of the Romanian territories, including Bessarabia, were roped into in the USSR. Therefore, when Romania suspended the procedure of granting citizenship to Moldavians in 2002, there was a lot of frustration and some Moldovan and Romanian publications criticised the slow rhythm of granting citizenship, as well as red tape. Nevertheless, more and more people continued to solicit Romanian citizenship, in spite of the fact that in 2003 only six requests were approved. The following year, in 2004, 257 Moldovans were granted Romanian citizenship, with the number increasing to 1317 in 2005. Rather the same situation was seen after 1991, when this process started. So, almost 100,000 of Moldovans got the dreamed-of citizenship between 1991 and 2001, according to official statistics. This number had earlier been reported by the press at about half a million. In the past, when the authorities discussed means of alleviating

the existing situation, they had announced their intention to amend the legislation in order to simplify the terms for examination of the requests. It was also specified that the citizenship law would require proof of the solicitor's Romanian origin as well as possession of a residence in Romania, absence of a criminal record, and a test in Romanian language, history and culture. The most recent proposals coming from the Romanian political parties refer to a citizenship lottery or to the simultaneous rehabilitation by law of all the former Romanian citizens from Moldova. The second proposal was much criticised by the opposition, who pointed to the risk of Moldova's depopulation of ethnic Romanians. The main condition that nowadays urges Romanian authorities to make a decision is the visa system instituted between the two countries after the accession of Romania to the EU. As the number of people crossing the border is high, the Romanian consulate is not able to grant such a high number of visas; every day, thousands of people crowd in front of the Romanian consulate in Chisinau. The proposal on the Romanian side to extend its consular network with two more offices – in the north and south of the country – was initially accepted by Chisinau, but then rejected some weeks later. A travel agreement between Romania and Moldova was signed at the end of 2006, which stipulates all existing European legislation. So, Moldovan citizens exempt from taxes at entering Romania, possessors of diplomatic and on-duty passports do not need to solicit visas; the agreement also stipulates multiple-entry visas. In spite of the significant economical growth reported in recent years by the government, Moldova still remains one of the poorest European countries. According to official statistics, 310,000 Moldovans were working abroad in the first quarter of 2007, but in fact, the number is higher. Two thirds are men, and two out of three are from rural areas. The numerous actions undertaken to stop labour migration didn't work out and the number of those that return back home is still rather small. ■