

# Eastern Europe's Ghost Children

**When parents in Romania, Ukraine and Moldova escaped awful domestic conditions to seek work elsewhere, many left their children behind. The pattern has led to the creation of a generation of so-called 'white orphans,' damaged children with parents they don't know.**

by *Luisa Betti*

Monica died of anorexia in an Arad, Romania hospital last September. She was 10. She'd stopped eating and speaking after her mother left Italy seeking work, leaving her behind with her grandmother. The Monicas of the world are known as "Left Behind" children because they're forced to stay put after their parents move abroad. They're also known as "White Orphans," children bereft of parents even though their parents are alive and well. Last year, Brussels hosted a "Left Behind" conference, which was subtitled, "the economic impact of migration on children left behind and their families." Data presented at the conferences suggested that Eastern Europe is home to more than half-a-million children who live in semi-abandoned state. The figure is approximate at best, with some officials saying the number of kids put in the keep of relatives and neighbors, locked in institutions, or simply left to survive on their own, is actually in the millions.

According to UNICEF figures, of Romania's five million children, 350,000 are still in the country while the parents work outside the country. Half of them are under age 10. According to Italy's Federazione Nazionale delle Onlus per bambini della Romania (FONC), more than a million Romanian youth is informally in the hands of relatives or living on their own, despite a national law that requires the appointment of a guardian before a parent or parents leave the country.

Petru Calian, a member of Romania's Liberal Democratic Party, has proposed a bill that would require parents to register their children with a notary public if they intend to leave, also appointing a legitimate guardian to

make decisions in the best interest of the child. Fines for failing to do so would run between €600 and €2,380.

Most left-behinds suffer psychological symptoms including anxiety, depression, apathy, learning disorders, and a general indifference to life. Parental absence can diminish the strength of the body's immune system, complicating even minor illness. "Psychologists and specialists who work with transnational families have confirmed that the most common consequence of abandonment is isolation and indifference," says Catalin Luca, a member of the Social Alternatives Association, a Romanian NGO. "Unfortunately, some of these kids turn to extreme acts, such as suicide or starvation. Parental absence triggers massive depression that is exacerbated by family poverty or severe physical and psychological abuse."

Bad environments increase the risk. In January, a Romanian father awaiting the return of his wife for a family vacation ended up killing the couple's seven-year-old child and himself after she canceled the visit.

Silvia Dumitrache, who heads Adri Onlus (the Association of Romanian Women in Italy), is behind the "Mama Loves You" project intended to get mothers to communicate with their children using Skype. The program uses national public libraries as part of the "National Biblionet" program. She says her sister has told her horror stories of fathers "who rape their daughters or make them surrogates for their estranged wives," and "of girls forced into prostitution by relatives."

Sexual abuse, alcoholism, and violence are part and parcel of an unprotected environment that scorns parents who leave their children behind, exposing the young to resentment. Many kids turn wildly aggressive. Young

A child whose parents have left pictured in Bucha, Ukraine, near Kiev.

women are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and early marriages.

For Camilla Azzini of the Albergo della Vita (Tree of Life) association that coordinates the European Commission "Left Behind" project in the context of the EU's "Fundamental Rights and Citizenship" charter and also works on the so-called "Home Alone" project based in Romania, most kids grow depressed because they're kept in the dark. "Departure is going to be traumatic in any case but there are ways of portraying so that it's not associated

with direct betrayal," says Azzini. "Otherwise Mom and Dad leave for seemingly no reason, without explanation, without children told about motives or intentions."

Children left out of the adult choice to leave, which they see as a mysterious disappearance, creates a sense of loss that unbalances all aspects of daily life. "The symptoms are usually a general loss of interest in life, including school, general activities, and life itself," says Azzini. "I remember two children who were looked after





by their grandmother. They basically shared a room with her. The children, a boy and a girl, communicated often with their mother but they didn't have the slightest idea where she was. They saw their lives as on standby, without a real window to the future."

The average wage in Romania is between €250 and €350 monthly, with the low end at €150. Poverty, especially in rural areas, has been the chief motivator for families going abroad in search of employment. Women often enter the care-giving market, particularly in Italy, Spain and Germany. Men usually become laborers, although since the global economic downturn began in 2008, there have been fewer departures and more returns, facilitating Romania's EU entry.

Since 1989, millions have left Romania and headed west. They've been joined by large waves from the Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Poland, the Baltic States and Russia. If male emigration doubled, total female numbers quadrupled, most of the women from Ukraine. Men stayed home while the women sought work in Italy. Scarlett Celmi, a psychologist for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) who works on an Italian foreign ministry-sponsored project titled "Capacity building intervention on behalf of local Ukrainian institutions," says that children left behind by Ukrainian mothers live most-

So-called "left behind" children, large numbers of who are in Romania, are often left to relatives or friends.

Usually, their parents have left home to seek employment in the West.

ly with their fathers who either plays head of household or folds his family into that of his parents. "These men are often unable to handle the emotional impact that the mother's abandonment has on children, and don't tell their kids what's going on," says Celmi. "The kids don't know why their mothers left, how long they're gone for, let alone when or if they're coming back. In some cases they're not even told they've gone. Working in schools, we've seen that the daily lives of these children are entirely centered on the wait: the phone calls, the gifts, the looking forward to the return, which if it doesn't happen exacerbates the absence. One eight-year-old girl went to live with her grandparents because her mother had moved to Genoa, but she didn't know a thing about the details of her mother's departure, so she filled them in with fantasy ideas."

Children often struggle in school. Those without mothers tense to lose any desire to stand out academically. Some turn aggressive, commit acts of vandalism, and are



the source of family squabbles. The situation deteriorates further when fathers separate their wives and leave their children to their relatives.

In Ukraine, the left behind numbers stand at some 130,000, according to government figures. Humanitarian organizations say the figure is closer to 300,000, while some 70,000 children are in orphanages or similar institutions. Alarming, 10 percent of all orphans commit suicide once released from orphanage care, while 60 percent of the women end up as prostitutes and 70 percent ties to some form of delinquency.

But the real emergency is the demographic collapse of the Republic of Moldova, the poorest country in Europe. Most of the country's population is now made up of children and the elderly. Working age adults have mostly emigrated. There are an estimated 10,000 children in institutions with state funding averaging €3 per child per day. Nine out of 10 of these children have living, working parents abroad. As a result, the European Commission, the Italian labor ministry and IOM have set up the a project that is working to address "the negative effects of migration on minors and families left behind."

"The Moldova social situation is made worse because of the conditions of absolute poverty, which have a tremendous impact on the population," says Celmi. "We work on mothers to maintain a relationship with their left behind children, because in the Moldovan case parents literally leave the kids to fend for themselves."

The fear women have of going home, even briefly, worrying they won't be able to get back into the country where they've found work, produced thousands of cases

of permanent abandonment. At best, children are with their grandparents, at worst in dilapidated orphanages because their grandparents or relatives couldn't afford them. Take Victoriza, whose father is a mason in Russia and her mother a caregiver in Turin. Despite grandparents, she was forced into a state orphanage in Cinisenti, a remote village on Ukrainian border.

In the 1990s, American pediatrician and educator Thomas Berry Brazelton furnished a haunting snapshot of the conditions in some Eastern European orphanages, which in many cases haven't changed. "The most recent and dramatic example of total disregard for the needs of the child," he wrote, "is provided by orphanages Romania and other countries where the premise is cramming, in which infants and children are treated as if they're in a warehouse. Under such conditions, without appropriately warm or nurturing interaction, children developed severe shortcomings in affect, intellect and social skills. The four and five-year-olds would communicate with a few basic gestures, as in stretching their hands out to ask food. If troubled, these kids would frantically flap their arms and even beat themselves. They didn't have linguistic baggage, even at a symbolic level, necessary to communicate their most basic needs, and only a limited ability receive warmth and relief when they suffered or were upset. With constant help and patience, some of these children made progress: they were able to learn to reach out, to show affection for others, to communicate with gestures, to develop basic skills in language and thought. But this recovery is part of a long and slow process that can take many years, and often the initial damages caused by deprivation can never be repaired." ●