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Moldova

Moldovan Health Communications Network

It would be difficult to find a less hospitable environment for tobacco control than Moldova. The country became Europe's poorest not long after Transdnier, the region with most of its industry, declared itself independent in the 1990s (a declaration recognized by only one country in the world, Russia). The Moldovan economy has since relied on two key agricultural products, wine and tobacco. The support of one of these products was knocked away in March 2006 when the Russian government, citing unsubstantiated hygienic concerns, imposed an unexpected and immediate ban on imports of wine from Moldova and Georgia. Russia lifted its ban on Moldovan wine in November 2006, but the nine-month ban had dealt a crippling blow to the country's economy. Previously, as much as 90 percent of Moldovan wine exports, valued at more than US\$250 million per year, had gone to Russia.¹

The subsequent near-collapse of the wine industry left tobacco the undisputed king through most of 2006. This development only heightened the crop's already significant influence among policymakers; the domestic tobacco industry remains

under state control and officials are loath to take any action that might reduce revenues or adversely affect tobacco-related employment. According to Irina Zatushevski, a longstanding Moldovan antitobacco crusader, tobacco control advocates are now routinely derided by some opponents in government as the “biggest enemies” of Moldova’s economy.²

Such rhetoric has been accompanied by likeminded action—or, more accurately, lack of action. The FCTC ratification process came to a standstill for several months following the Russian wine ban when the Moldovan government withdrew plans to submit ratification papers to parliament. The Ministry of Health did not comment on the government’s move, apparently preferring—or being forced by top officials—to defer to the more vocal and powerful Ministry of Agriculture, which not only opposes the FCTC and most tobacco control measures, but also has sought to increase tobacco cultivation. The health ministry’s attitude was encapsulated in a remark, as reported by Zatushevski, from a ministry representative at a roundtable on tobacco that was organized in early 2006 by Moldovan NGOs: “You should not forget that without tobacco, we would die.”

These developments seem to bode poorly for tobacco control efforts across the board. But it would be shortsighted to dismiss either the short- or long-term prospects of Zatushevski, the head of the Moldovan Health Communications Network (MHCN), and her allies in other NGOs and among a growing number of public-sector policy-makers. Given the importance of tobacco to the Moldovan economy, it is remarkable that the country is even on the brink of FCTC ratification. This achievement is due at least in part to advocacy efforts at all levels of Moldovan society, from personal contacts with government officials to awareness campaigns involving schoolchildren. In a small country such as Moldova, targeted advocacy of this sort is relatively inexpensive and can have a disproportionate impact on changing attitudes and policies. Indeed, according to research commissioned by MHCN in 2003, 69 percent of Moldovans believed that laws regulating and controlling tobacco products should be strengthened and enforced.

Existing legal framework

The FCTC ratification process, which stalled after the Russian wine ban, began again when the government submitted a draft bill to parliament in September 2006. Several parliamentary committees supported the bill and recommended that it be submitted to the full legislative body for a vote. However, in November the vote was postponed indefinitely after a large number of legislators expressed concern that FCTC ratification would harm the rural economy. The parliament had yet to vote on the measure by the end of March 2007.

Meanwhile, since the late 1990s several laws aimed at chipping away at the powerful tobacco industry have been passed and amended. The most sweeping law, passed in 2001, contains provisions regarding the sale and advertising of tobacco products. For example, selling cigarettes is prohibited

- ▶ on the grounds of schools and medical and sports facilities,
- ▶ without health warning labels on packs,
- ▶ from open packs (i.e., selling cigarettes singly), and
- ▶ to people under age 18.

Advertising tobacco products is banned on radio and TV, and outside advertising visible to the general public is restricted to places where tobacco is sold. Smoking is prohibited in most indoor public places, including cinemas, concert halls, and schools. In 2004, the prime minister also signed a decree forbidding smoking on the premises of all government ministries and local public administration buildings.

Zatushevski said, however, that there are significant gaps in the laws—gaps that she and her advocacy colleagues are seeking to plug. There are no provisions limiting tobacco industry sponsorship of events; tobacco firms, she said, have held promotional activities at nightclubs, subsidizing entrance fees for young people who might otherwise not have been able to attend. Enforcement is also reportedly lax, with many people continuing to smoke in their offices in violation of the law. MHCN has organized “check ups” in which staff and volunteers document and publicize violations. In one recent case, a cigarette distribution firm was caught promoting its wares on the grounds of a school. A journalist covering the “check up” wrote a story about the firm’s violations; in the wake of the bad publicity, some kiosks located at or near school grounds stopped selling cigarettes altogether.

Through their personal contacts in the government and elsewhere, Zatushevski and other colleagues are currently seeking to amend existing tobacco control laws to close the promotion loophole and also place a complete ban on tobacco advertising. (Permitting outside advertising where cigarettes are sold has resulted in tobacco kiosks in Chisinau, the capital, being covered with massive cigarette advertisements that are visible up and down the streets.) The proposed changes are expected to be considered by the government in 2007.

Tobacco control advocacy activities

Efforts on the legal front are only one part of recent tobacco control advocacy initiatives. Over the past five years various other activities designed to reduce smoking

—about one-third of adults smoke, most of them men but a growing percentage are women—have been undertaken to draw greater attention to the consequences and offer solutions. According to Zatushevski, such activities include the following:

- ▶ Monitoring the coverage of tobacco issues in the Moldovan press and disseminating information on tobacco control issues, through press kits, to health journalists.
- ▶ Holding workshops and roundtables on tobacco issues for health officials, personnel from other NGOs (particularly those working with youth and women), and members of the media. One key goal is to raise awareness about the health repercussions of tobacco use, based on experience abroad and in Moldova. The seminars and workshops are also intended to expand the number of trained tobacco control activists and to advocate for specific policy changes when officials are present.
- ▶ Organizing, in cooperation with youth NGOs and the WHO Liaison Office in Moldova, an annual drawing and essay competition called “Let’s Grow Up Without Tobacco!” Each year, 1,000 copies of a booklet containing the winning essays are printed and distributed, with at least one copy going to each of the country’s schools.

Major obstacles and next steps

MHCN and its allies have helped to usher in changes that just a decade ago would have been unthinkable in this tobacco-dependent country. The momentum slowed in 2006, but the Russian government’s repeal of its ban on Moldovan wine was expected to relieve pressure on Moldovan authorities to defer to the domestic tobacco industry in the way that they did during the ban. The return of the wine industry as a counterbalance is likely to help weaken a major obstacle to tobacco control efforts—the importance of tobacco within Moldova’s agricultural sector and, by extension, its overall economy.

Zatushevski said she also expects the momentum to be regained as members of the media and an increasing number of legislators become more committed to ratifying the FCTC and adding more restrictive amendments to tobacco laws. This trend may be enhanced by research and data that show the clear health effects of smoking in Moldovan society and demolish the financial arguments used by the tobacco industry. Already, according to Zatushevski, an economic expert has prepared a presentation showing that in reality, the majority of profits from cigarette sales go not to domestic tobacco firms (which are controlled by the state), but to multinational tobacco importers. Additional research is necessary to determine the overall economic costs to society of tobacco use, taking into account funds spent on health costs such as oncology and pulmonary care.

Other obstacles identified by Zatushevski follow below. She said MHCN is developing strategies to overcome them, often in collaboration with funders, government and NGO allies, and the media.

- ▶ **Lack of civil society expertise and pressure.** There are no NGOs dealing specifically with tobacco control in Moldova. MHCN has been the most active, but it is small itself and has to pursue other objectives in its broader mission of strengthening Moldova's overall health conditions, not just those related to tobacco.
- ▶ **Low tax burden.** The cheapest domestic cigarettes cost just 10 to 12 U.S. cents a pack, according to Zatushevski, while a loaf of bread is three times as expensive. In 2004, the government tried to raise the tax on imported cigarettes (which generally cost a bit more but are still relatively inexpensive). It was forced to abandon that effort, however, because it went against World Trade Organization rules mandating similar tax regimes for similar products, regardless of origin. The government reportedly is now considering raising taxes on domestic producers, but that proposal may fail because of fears of social unrest.
- ▶ **Cigarette smuggling.** "No one knows the level of cigarette smuggling," Zatushevski observed, "but it's big." It goes both ways, too. Smuggled cigarettes enter through the Transdnister region, which is outside Moldovan government control, and exit to Romania and the broader European Union. Reducing smuggling will require improved relations among central authorities, Transdnister leaders, and the Russian and Ukrainian governments.
- ▶ **Lack of enforcement of existing laws and poor examples.** Greater enforcement is needed of all provisions in Moldova's tobacco laws. The most egregious violations are those that occur regularly in medical institutions, including where lung cancer patients are treated. It is difficult to stress the seriousness of tobacco use when the head of Moldova's oncological institute continues to smoke regularly, even during interviews with journalists about tobacco control. MHCN believes that greater media attention to lack of enforcement will create public pressure on authorities to respond appropriately.
- ▶ **Lack of leadership from the Ministry of Health.** "If the ministry were more active, things would be much better," Zatushevski said. She noted, however, that ministry officials often seem reluctant to confront the protobacco stance

of the Ministry of Agriculture. The ministry's lack of consistent commitment to tobacco control is the most important obstacle to remove, Zatushevski said. If ministry officials played a greater public role in pushing for ratification and more stringent tobacco control, most Moldovans would accept its recommendations out of the belief that it was concerned for their health, she added.

Despite these significant obstacles, Zatushevski is cautiously optimistic. The small size of the country—and the fact that most players in tobacco control know each other and the government officials and parliamentarians with whom they are working—means that change can occur quickly and suddenly. Moreover, she said, authorities in three districts—Balti, Calarasi, and Cahul—recently have implemented smoke-free policy programs that could serve as models for the rest of the country.

Notes

1. The lifting of the bans on wine and beef resulted from Moldova's threaten to block Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization if the bans remained in place. No specific evidence was ever presented to support Russia's claims that Moldovan agricultural products were unsafe.
2. Zatushevski's comments throughout this case study are based on an interview conducted in July 2006 and e-mail correspondence two months later.