

### **Invisible Natalia: Moldavian Gagauz caregivers in Turkish households**

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In the past two decades, Turkey, as a developing country, has seen extensive gains in terms of life expectancy and living standards. The average life expectancy for the Turkish citizen has risen from 57 in 1981 to 74 in 2011. As living conditions in Turkey begin to reach the standards of developed countries, Turkish society is faced with a new kind of health challenge. According to World Health Organization (WHO) data, about 500,000 people are currently estimated to have Alzheimer's disease in Turkey, and this number is on the rise. The data also reveal that Turkey is estimated to be one of the top four countries in the world with the highest prevalence of Alzheimer's by 2050, when the number of people who are diagnosed with Alzheimer's in Turkey is expected to reach 2 million. Being a progressive disease characterised by memory disorders, Alzheimer's tends to affect mostly elderly people above 60 years of age. Due to the nature of the disease, Alzheimer's patients require extensive care, yet the Turkish health system is woefully ill equipped both in terms of facilities and qualified staff to deal with the pending Alzheimer's crisis.

A grey economy has emerged as a result of the gap between what is offered by the Turkish health system and the ever-increasing number of Alzheimer's patients in Turkey. Families with enough economic means often hire non-professional medical staff as domestic caregivers due to the fact that there is often no public facility to take stricken family members to for care and treatment. While native caregivers tend to demand high salaries and are often unwilling to spend their entire working week with the patients in question, foreign migrant workers constitute a cheaper and more appealing alternative. This situation has created a demand for domestic caregivers from post-socialist societies in the region, particularly from the Turkic-speaking parts of Moldova (Gagauzia).

With a per capita GDP of roughly \$2,000, Moldova is one of the poorest countries both in Europe and in the developing world. Located on the border with Ukraine, the autonomous region of Gagauzia remains one of the most underdeveloped regions of Moldova. The lack of self-sustaining economic opportunities in their native homeland has created a cheap and mobile workforce out of the Gagauz people. In regional Moldavian towns such as Komrat (population 24,000), Cadır-Lunga (19,500) or Vulcănești (14,000) almost every family has a female member employed in Istanbul under irregular working conditions. Due to the near impossibility of returning back home, the working conditions of female Gagauz employed in Turkey are characterised by menial and precarious labour; they often have to take up jobs which might be described as being the lowest in the 'economic trash heap'.

The phenomenon of the Moldavian Gagauz female caregiver in Turkey is perhaps emblematic in highlighting the conditions of precarious and unregulated workforces of the European and wider region. Often working on either a six-day or full-week schedule, the caregiver is on a non-stop shift which is never witnessed by the general public. Contracted to help households with old and/or terminally-ill family members, domestic workers not only perform more basic forms of manual labour such as household chores but also affective forms of labour. Lacking health insurance and denied access to social security, foreign domestic workers constitute an essential yet invisible aspect of the bourgeois sphere of life in Turkish society. Despite their growing presence in Turkish society, the subject of domestic caregivers and the documentation of their labour practices remain relatively unexplored within the context of academic research in Turkey.



A still from *Unawarded Performances* (2005), a film about Moldavian women working in Istanbul households made by artist Gülsün Karamustafa.

Thus 'Invisible Natalia: the affective care practices and strategies of Moldavian Gagauz caregivers in Turkish households' is an ethnographic study funded by the British Institute at Ankara that aims to document the care practices and strategies used by Gagauz domestic workers living with Turkish Alzheimer's patients. By doing so, this project aims to overcome the lack of academic literature on affective labour, irregular migration and the Moldavian Gagauz community in Turkey. After the completion of the project, the documentation will be shared with experts from the Alzheimer's Foundation in Turkey to prepare an advisory report on the positive and negative aspects of the affective care practices of foreign caregivers. The report will be presented to policymakers in the health-care system to promote knowledge transfer from health professionals to foreign migrants actively employed in looking after Turkish Alzheimer's patients.