

Mama Margherita Children's Home

Project INE 19-015-D 19 0440 002 (2019-2022)

Report Period: September 2021- December 2022

Narrative Report of the Residential Care Community for Children Separated from Their Families 'Casa Mama Margherita'

The Residential Care Community for Children Separated from Their Families 'Casa Mama Margherita' is a structure accredited by the Republic of Moldova and operates in close cooperation with various Regional Child Protection Departments.

Our Children's Home offers daily hosting and care to children separated from their families (orphans, victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse, etc.). It is dedicated to Mrs. Margherita Occhiena (Mama Margherita), St. John Bosco's mother. She helped her son to care about and educate children from poor families, orphans and abandoned children in Turin (Italy) in 19th century.

Children (aged 7 to 18) living in our children's home receive affection and attention and have the opportunity to go to school, develop their personalities, integrate into society and look forward to their future.

The past year has been marked by two events in particular: the non-renewal of the agreement with the social services of the city of Chisinau and the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

The decision on our part not to renew the cooperation agreement with the Chisinau city social services, which expired on 8 March 2022, meant that all the children had to be relocated and placed under the care of the city itself.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine (24 February 2022) and the huge influx of refugees into Moldova meant that, once all the boys in the family home had left, the project was suspended for a few months (from the beginning of March to the end of May).

As already described in a letter dated 12 May 2022, the decision not to renew the cooperation agreement with the social services of the city of Chisinau was taken due to the unwillingness of the social services themselves to accept our insistent request to relocate two brothers (LISII Ruslan and Dumitru) who had been entrusted to us in 2021 and for whom our facility had proved inadequate. In addition to this, their presence had severely affected the climate of the family home and the psychological well-being of the other boys housed, as well as the staff.

The insecurity generated by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the huge influx of refugees into Moldova and the consequent appeal by the civil and religious authorities to offer hospitality to those who had escaped the bombings, as well as the real fear that Russia might soon conquer Odessa and invade Moldova as well, made us decide to temporarily close the family home, which remained empty at the time, in order to concentrate our forces on welcoming the refugees. In a few days, we transformed the spaces of our centre into dormitories to accommodate up to 100 people and set up the canteen in the gymnasium.

We decided to reopen the family home in June because in the meantime the geo-political situation had stabilised and the threat of the imminent Russian invasion had vanished. In addition, we had had requests from social services in several regions of Moldova and we thought that the summer holidays (school in Moldova ends on 31 May) was a good time to start again.

From September 2021 to February 2022, nine boys aged 12 to 18 lived in the 'Casa Mama Margherita' centre. All of the boys were legally 'parentless', in some cases because their parents had died, in others because their parents had been deprived of parental authority. In almost all cases, the father was unknown.

Four children were enrolled in Gymnasium 31 (the neighbourhood public school) but only two attended. Five children attended vocational schools in the city.

From June to December, five boys were taken in. One of them attended a vocational training centre, the others the neighbourhood compulsory school.

Activities during the reporting period aimed to achieve six objectives:

1) Safety. In addition to the daily effort to create a welcoming environment, suitable for children and young people (adolescents) that conveys a sense of safety and security, from September 2021 to February 2022 we continued to recommend compliance with all COVID-19 prevention protocols. Fortunately, none of our teenagers fell ill during this period, and the epidemiological situation in Moldova during these months was never critical.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had also caused concern among the boys in the family home. Although everyone already knew that they would be relocated to other facilities by 8 March, we worked to reassure them. Various options were considered should the armed conflict spread to Moldova.

When we informed the children of our decision not to renew the cooperation agreement with the city's social services and that this would result in their being relocated to other facilities, a certain insecurity arose in all of them about their future. With the entire educational team, we implemented a whole series of interventions aimed at mitigating this feeling and accepting change as an opportunity for growth.

2) Physical and mental wellbeing. During the year, the children's/young people's physical health was regularly monitored, with referrals to the family doctor as necessary, laboratory tests and specialist medical examinations were carried out, and the various prescribed drugs were administered. Particular attention was paid to oral hygiene, given the repeated need to visit the dentist.

The arrival of a deaf-mute boy in June meant that we had to refer to various specialists for a more precise diagnosis. We also used the services of the speech therapy centre, unfortunately with poor results.

Several times we had to resort to emergency room care following falls, which in some cases also resulted in fractures of the upper limbs.

In no fewer than four cases, we also needed the help of a psychiatrist.

From the psychological point of view, since the lady with whom we had worked for the past few years had to give up because of her health condition, we hired a new psychologist who worked a lot with the boys in the months of November to February, accompanying them in the relocation process.

From June to December, psychological assistance was covered by another project for both Ukrainian refugee boys and Moldovan boys in distress.

3) Responsibility. Efforts were made to make the boys responsible for their daily duties both at school and at home.

From a scholastic point of view, several of the new boys had serious shortcomings because their parents had not followed them. With patience and great dedication, the educators, also assisted by two Ukrainian refugee teachers hosted in our centre, helped the boys to improve their school performance, achieving more than satisfactory results. Some of the boys showed good will and a desire to study. Some, unfortunately, struggled more to find the necessary motivation.

With regard to housekeeping, all the children were regularly involved in household chores. General cleaning was organised during the holidays. Before Christmas, all the boys got involved in decorating the house.

One boy, aged 17, was placed as a helper during the summer camp organised by us in July. Having recently arrived he felt uncomfortable due to his physical handicap (deafness), which over

the years had led him to withdraw into himself and have little contact with others. Thanks to the tasks entrusted to him, which he carried out with dedication and punctuality, he was able to forge links with other peers involved in running the summer camp.

4) Emotionality and affectivity. Efforts were made to help the children become aware of their feelings and express them in an appropriate form. Particular attention was paid to the expression of fears related to moving to other facilities and to war, as well as to the suffering of detachment from the other children and from the educators and collaborators of the family home.

Particular attention was also given to the new arrivals, helping them to settle into their new environment.

The boys' and co-workers' birthdays were special occasions to express mutual affection and gratitude.

5) Protagonism. We supported the children in the various decision-making processes, helping them to analyse the situation from several points of view. We fostered their creativity and protagonism. The relaxation of anti-COVID measures allowed the boys to participate in various sports competitions organised by the school. Two boys were able to regularly attend football trainings, one the swimming pool.

When the war broke out in Ukraine, the boys, during the last days of their stay in our house, were involved in setting up the refugee centre, to their great satisfaction.

During the summer, the boys participated in activities offered by our oratory, in June and July here in Chisinau, in August in Cretoaia. This allowed them to demonstrate their skills in both sports and the arts.

6) Relations with relatives. One of our commitments remains to help the children maintain ties with their relatives, when this is possible and permitted by the social services.

From September 2021 to February 2022, there were several contacts with relatives. For the two LISII siblings, the contact with their older brother meant that he agreed to take charge of them when they left our home and the social services made a flat available to them. One boy was able to spend a few days of the Christmas holidays at his aunt's, but she did not have the financial means to take care of him. Another boy continued to see his maternal grandparents and his mother on a regular basis who, however, as she had never been interested in the boy, so she continued not to want to take care of him.

A lot of work has been done with the new boys who have arrived since June to try to get to know their relatives. Various family visits were organised. It was also possible to organise two meetings in prison with the mother of one of the boys. In some cases, unfortunately, the parents did not turn up for the appointment, nor were they at home, much to the disappointment of the boys who had looked forward to the meeting and prepared small presents (drawings, greeting cards, etc.).

From an economic point of view, the costs incurred were about EUR 150 higher than budgeted.

This was possible because, in the face of an unfavourable euro exchange rate (20.53 in 2020/21, 20.18 in 2021/22), and the generalised increase in prices following the outbreak of war in Ukraine (inflation in 2022 was 30.2%), there were only 5 young people hosted from June to December.

In absolute terms, the largest deviation is attributable to utility costs, which are linked to increases in gas, electricity and fuel prices as a result of the energy crisis throughout Europe. In percentage terms, the largest deviation concerns the tax for waste disposal: two and a half times that budgeted. Already last year, the deviation was 80%. Unfortunately, Moldova still lags behind

in the culture of separate waste collection and recycling, but the increase in waste disposal fees is helping to raise awareness among the population, who previously ignored this problem.

As far as salaries are concerned, the budget was not exceeded this year, although salaries have increased by 20 per cent since June to cope with the rising cost of living.

The project coordinator continued to receive remuneration, partially, even when the family home was closed (March-May) because he nevertheless completed all the documentation for the transfer of the children, monitored their insertion into the new realities, maintained contact with the children and with the managers of the new reception facilities, and finally established contact with the social services of the regions to present our family home and assess the situations of the children we were asked to take in.

The maintenance technician, the cook and the cleaning lady earned more than budgeted, as they did the previous year, because their hourly wages had already been increased at the beginning of 2021.

Savings were made with regard to the cost of the educators because, on the one hand, since the school was back in regular attendance, there was no need for their presence in the mornings. In addition, the voluntary work performed by two Ukrainian teachers hosted in our centre made it possible to further reduce the working hours of the educators, who did not have to follow the children all the time they were busy doing their homework. Finally, a Salesian was also involved in night care, which allowed further savings to be made.

As for the savings related to the psychologist's services, as mentioned above, this was possible because the psychological counselling services were covered by another, larger project in which the boys in the family home could also participate.

With regard to activity-related expenses, in general, the expenditure chapter was adhered to, with a saving of 5%.

In detail, savings were again made in clothing this year because the boys left the family home at the end of the winter, and the new arrivals were only 5 instead of the 10 budgeted. The presence of a small group of children also allowed savings in the purchase of personal hygiene products.

Medical costs were lower than budgeted because we did not need to use paid services.

There were no costs for public transport because the vocational school children bought season tickets with the subsidy they received from the school and the younger children attending the neighbourhood school walked to school.

School expenses, on the other hand, were 58% higher because the desire of some boys to attend swimming lessons, football practice and an English course was encouraged.

Finally, house maintenance expenses more than doubled compared to the budget, while remaining at last year's level, an indication that they had probably been underestimated at the planning stage.

Among the emergencies, however, we included the invoice for the purchase of the paint needed to repaint the interior of the house. When we had the inspection for accreditation of the family home in 2021, one of the observations had been that the walls were dirty, the other that the dining room furniture was ruined. We therefore had to repaint the house and replace the dining room furniture (the latter purchased thanks to an offer received from a private benefactor).

Chisinau, 19th May 2023



Fr. Andrea Ballan, SDB