

HOPE FOR MOLDOVA'S STRAY DOGS

Photos and text by **Sophie Gamand**

*In the Republic of Moldova, a small ex-Soviet Union country landlocked between Ukraine and Romania, and the poorest country of Europe, free-ranging dogs are omnipresent. The situation has been described by [FOUR PAWS INTERNATIONAL](#) as “out of control” for an estimated “over 20,000 stray dogs” living in the Greater Chişinău area alone. FOUR PAWS has launched an emergency relief support program in the country, in partnership with **Doctor Vet Moldova**, a local animal welfare organization. Together, they are implementing a long-term, sustainable, and strategic Dog Population management program, using FOUR PAWS’ high-volume CNVR approach (Catch – Neuter – Vaccinate – Return).*



“Watch your step!” someone yelled above the screeching sound of barking dogs. A small pup in a diaper zipped toward me, dragging his paralyzed legs. I painstakingly navigated the room full of yapping dogs waltzing around my feet, competing for attention. I’d just entered Doctor Vet Moldova’s veterinary clinic in Chişinău, where FOUR PAWS had set up their high-volume sterilization clinic for the week.



In the backyard of the clinic, I found more dogs: big, medium, small, furry, skittish, clingy, barking, hiding, limping, jumping all over me. A family of misfits – scuffles included. 56 dogs claimed Doctor Vet’s clinic as their temporary home. Come winter’s end, the healthy ones would be moved to another larger shelter facility outside of Chişinău.

I knew too well the intensity of such place. From the smell of morning feces mixed with cleaning products, to the incessant barking, to the sheer number of dogs demanding safety and love. I knew this dance, having visited many places like this before. Each one chipping away at my heart, bringing me closer to full-blown compassion fatigue. Standing amid the dogs, everything in me retreated, and while my hands distributed as much affection as I could to the hopeful dogs around me, my heart locked up, determined to not fall in love.

For a moment, I forgot how excited I had been about witnessing a CNVR program in action, and its potential to solve the stray dog crisis in Moldova.



A puppy hides behind wood panels after he was scolded by a senior dog.



1.

A BUSTLING SHELTER
AND A DOG NAMED BOSS





Doctor Vet Moldova's main shelter was further away, in the Cricova region known for its delicious wines. Funded mostly by the meager proceeds of their Chişinău low-cost veterinary clinic, the open-air facility housed 160 more dogs and cats. Soon, tens more would join, though every enclosure seemed already full.

Rows of smaller enclosures delimited each area, and the place was littered with dog beds, dog houses and warm blankets. Winters can be extremely cold in Moldova, with temperatures reaching down to -15°C (5°F). While most dogs lived in enclosures they occasionally left for playtime, some dogs had the privilege of roaming free within the shelter's grounds.

Walking around the kennels, pursued by the deafening sound of barking dogs, I tried collecting myself. All around me, dogs were desperately jumping, pacing, and calling for attention or waiting quietly for a friendly pet. I've always found shelters to be extremely overwhelming. Not just because of the assault on senses, but because of the emotional weight attached to seeing all these dogs in limbo, waiting on life.

Greeting visitors at the shelter is a message painted in large yellow letters: "The best thing a person can have, is a dog". Under the inscription, almost as if someone had precisely staged him for theatrical effect, a majestic dog sat on a throne of blankets.





I knew the dogs were loved and cared for, and by all measures, these were the lucky ones from Moldova's streets. But given the shelter's low adoption rate – about 25 dogs a year – it was likely many of these dogs would spend the rest of their lives here. I feared most of these dogs would never know the comfort and peace of a home. Most would never get their emotional needs entirely met. Despite their best efforts, I wondered how the small, overworked team at Doctor Vet could possibly cater to over 200 dogs.

Dr Tatjana (veterinarian, middle), and Zina (left) and Talia (right), two shelter workers, enjoying a break in the sun, while giving a few pups some love.





I heard someone sing in the distance.
It was a slow, aching Russian melody.



I found Talia in one of the kennels, lovingly caressing an impressive pit bull-type dog named Boss.

Talia had wrapped a scarf around Boss' head, and the pair reminded me of a Pietà, a sacred moment.

Over three years ago, Vlad received a call about a “very aggressive dog”. Boss was found with a chain around his neck, his body covered in wounds. He looked like he had been tortured and had just escaped his tormentors. Vlad’s team brought him to the shelter, where at first, Boss struggled. Two weeks later, he’d already warmed up to the team and these days volunteers can leash him and walk him with no issue.

Shortly after Boss arrived at the shelter, Vlad got another call. A large female dog needed help. She lived tied in the middle of a melon field she was supposed to guard. After the season had ended, the farmers had left her behind. She had a huge wound on her neck left by the heavy rope that kept her pinned there. Vlad took her in. He introduced her to Boss, and it was “love at first sight”, the team explained. For 3 years, Boss and Ella lived together in their kennel, “like a family”. They even “ate their doghouse in the shape of a heart”.

Sadly, Ella got sick and passed away. Ever since, the team is convinced that Boss is in mourning. They tried to find him another companion, but nobody has worked out yet. Boss received adoption applications, but no match was made so far.



I asked about the song Talia was singing. It’s the [Baby mammoth song](#) from a 1981 animated short directed by Oleg Churkin (Песня мамонтёнка – Мама для мамонтёнка).

Long ago, a baby mammoth got frozen in the Arctic ice. As the ice melted, the mammoth woke up, looking for his mother. A wise walrus told him that while mammoths have since disappeared, similar-looking animals live far in the south. He sent the baby mammoth on an ice float to Africa.

*Across the blue sea, towards the green land
I'm sailing on my white ship
(...)
I want to get to the ground as soon as possible
"I'm here, I've arrived!" - I will shout to her
I will scream to my mother
Let mama hear, let mama come
May my mother find me!
After all, it does not happen in the world
For children to be lost
(...)*

Upon hearing Boss’ story, I tried to hold back my tears, but once everyone walked away, it seemed I just couldn’t stop the stream of thick, warm tears rolling down my cheeks. Those were tears of ache, but also tears of awe, for the beauty and grace I had just witnessed: the profound love Boss’ caretakers had found for him, and the stories they told themselves to continue their impossible work. Was Boss really mourning? Or were his caretakers in need of a place to hold their own pain?

I caught my breath and wiped my face with my sleeves. My sweater smelled dreadful and that snapped me back to the reality of the shelter. And I remembered why I had come to Moldova in the first place.

Coming into this trip, I had a sense of renewed hope. I was excited to learn more about FOUR PAWS CNVR approach for street dogs. I knew of similar programs (TNR) for stray cats but had never heard of such programs for dogs. Could we sterilize stray dogs and return them to the street, instead of sheltering them?

In the United States, this idea would be met by incredulity at best, or even wrath. People had told me before: *if you can catch a dog, it would be cruel to put him back on the street where his life is at risk every day.*

But that same mentality has birthed a broken, costly system. We have filled shelters to the brim, millions of dogs languishing in cages in the U.S. alone, sometimes waiting for years, and hundreds of thousands more are euthanized for “lack of space” each year.

No matter how many sacrifices, no matter how much the exhausted rescue community does, it is just never enough. The idea that we could – and should – save all these dogs has led to the warehousing of sentient beings, and the desperation of the people who care for them.

Sterilization campaigns are essential to reduce the number of unwanted dogs, but funding for such initiatives is hard to come by. Cities usually struggle to dedicate the resources needed, and private donors would rather support flashy, tear-jerking, feel-good rescue stories performed by eye-candy social media influencers... Spaying and Neutering isn't exactly as glamorous, yet it is the only approach that will make a difference.

While officials struggle to implement long-term, humane solutions, what to do with the countless dogs who currently call the streets their homes? If we think these dogs do not belong in kennels, and if no homes are available for them, as is the case in Moldova, where do these dogs belong?

Should these dogs – and could they – live in the street,
in collaboration with their community?



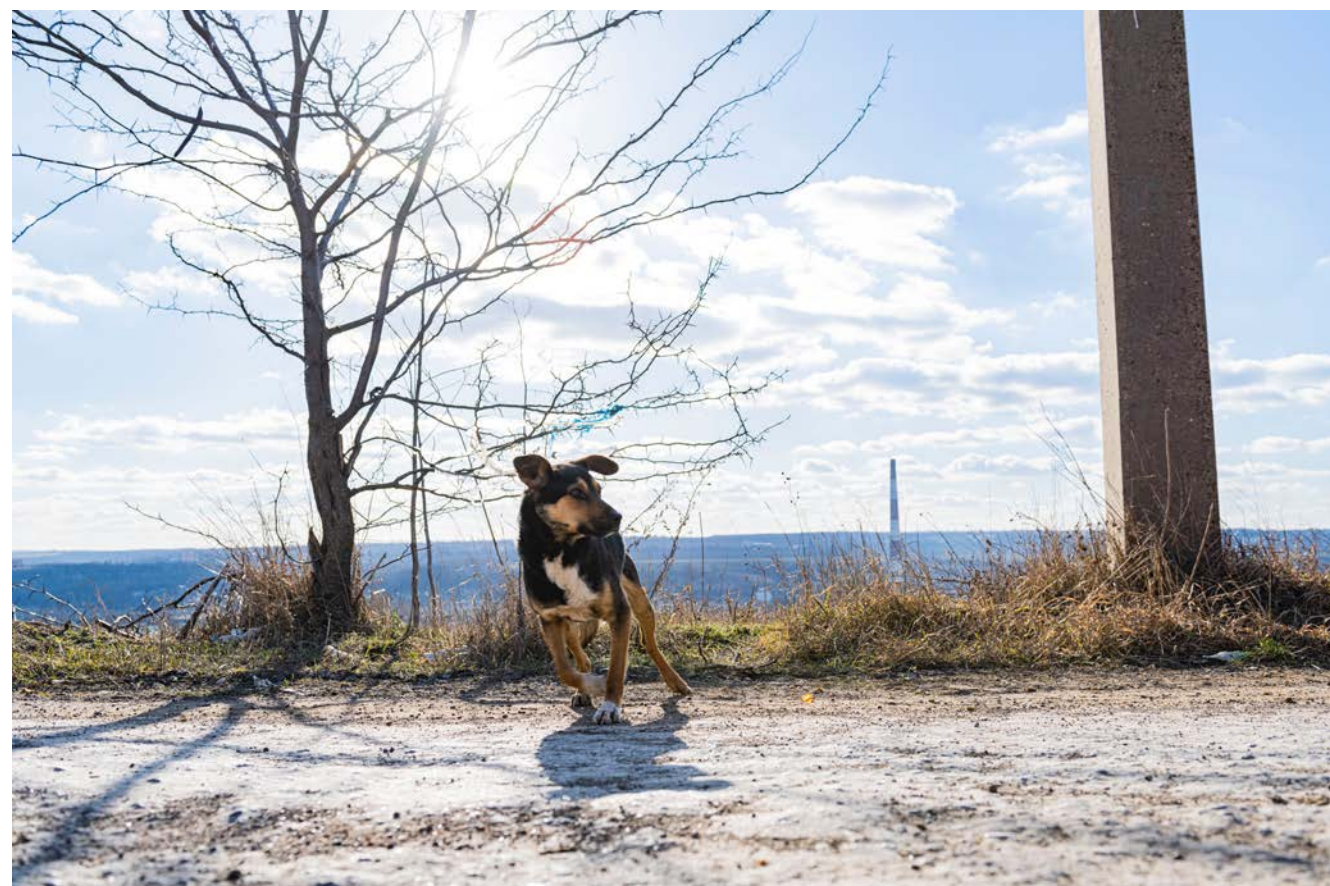
2.

THE EMOTIONAL
EQUATION OF CNVR

Vlad and his team member Stepan handled the first phase of CNVR: the catching of dogs. To my surprise, Vlad used a long blowpipe, and tranquilizer darts. The goal is to make the procedure the least intrusive and traumatizing as possible, for the dogs but the community as well. "People would be very concerned if they saw us walk around and shoot at dogs with guns. This way, they understand what we are doing."

A dog was identified in consultation with the community (some of the free-roaming dogs have families), then lured to a spot with some dog food. While the dog gobbled the food, Vlad drove closer, adjusted his aim, and expertly blew the dart straight into the dog's rear end. The blow was quiet and swift.

The dog let out a small, outraged yelp, looked at us in disbelief, and took off. Zipping through buildings fast, crossing through gardens, he headed towards the adjacent street. Radios in hand, Vlad and Stepan hurried, not to lose sight of the dog. We drove around and found the dog, tongue hanging, passed out from the powerful drugs, on a sidewalk. Vlad cautiously checked whether the dog was fully asleep, then grabbed him by the neck unceremoniously, and placed him into a crate.



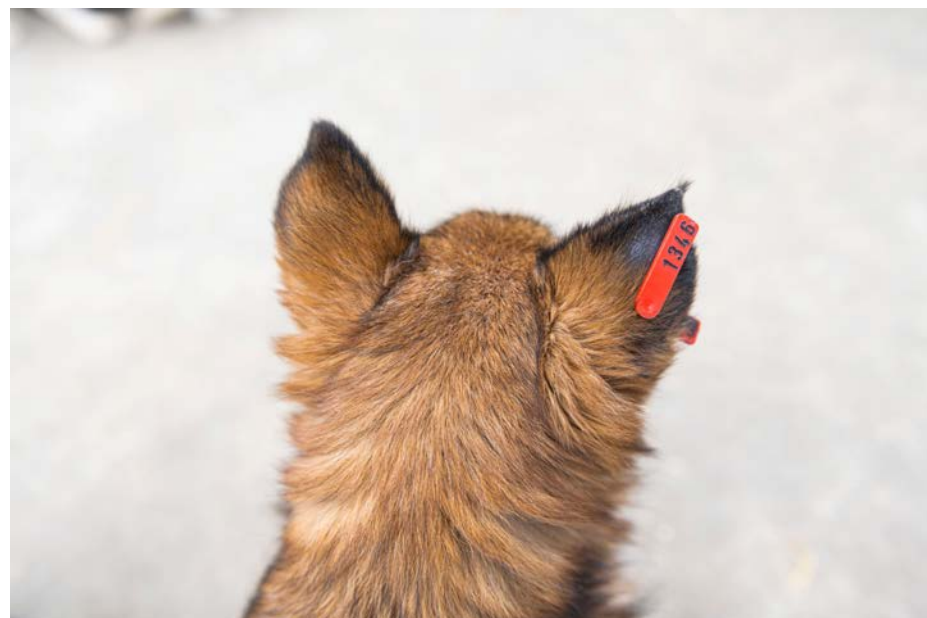


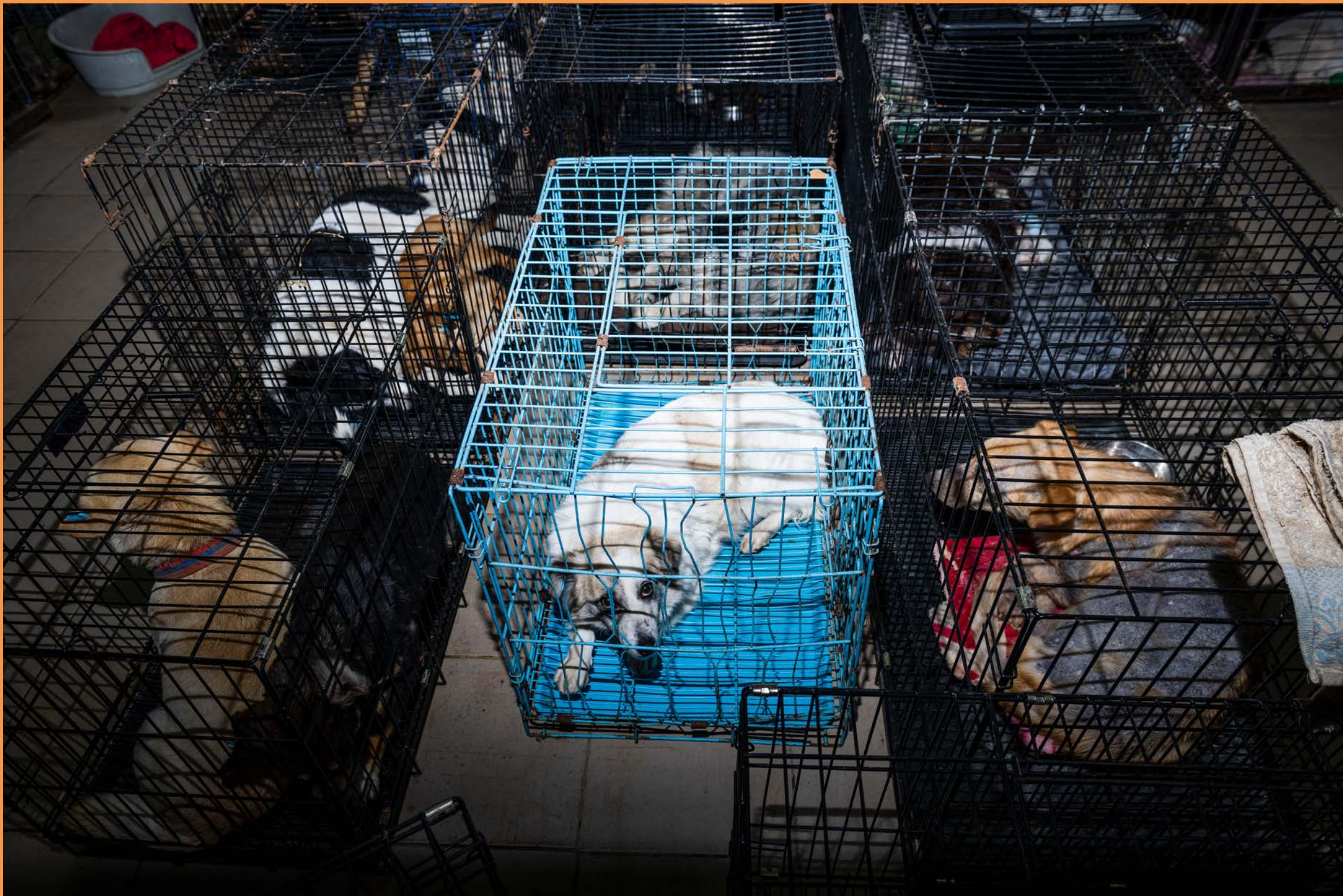
The dog was brought back to the veterinary clinic, where in the surgery room the FOUR PAWS team was hard at work, sterilizing a medium-sized dog.

There is something poignant about the dog's position on the surgery table. Tied to the slab, on their back, vulnerable, offered, legs spread out, tongue dangling. It looks like some weird alien dissection scene. It's like a *jamaïs vu* (the opposite of *déjà vu*): you think you know what you are seeing – a live dog –, but it looks creepy and unfamiliar. I am reminded of an old man I met in Ecuador during a similar clinic. He'd brought his dog in to be neutered. During the procedure (owners were invited to attend), the man considered his dog on the surgery table, seemingly lifeless. His face dropped, and he turned to me with a look of despair: "My dog is dead, isn't he? You can tell me. I can see that he is dead." Nothing I said managed to reassure the man, until his dog woke up a couple hours later and both walked back home.

In Moldova, the patients were kept in a room adjacent to the surgery room. I opened the door. Behind it, an adorable dog scurried away. Another one dragged his back legs and hopped around frantically, greeting me with gusto. The room was dark, otherwise quiet, full of wire crates. The crates were full of dogs. Some dogs whined softly. Others started growling. This was the pre-op / post-op room, where the patients awaited surgery or recovered after it was done. The atmosphere oozed of grogginess. I was filled with discomfort. Pointing the camera at the dogs felt wrong. They did not want to be here. They were confused. I left the room, gently pushing the paralyzed pup out of the way.

After the surgery and a couple of days in observation, the dogs would be returned to the street. In CNVR, the R doesn't stand for "Release", but for "Return" because the dogs are not just brought back into the streets, they are returned to the exact same spot they were taken from. They would now be adorned with a distinctive numbered ear tag, which also serves as identification, similar to a microchip.







Part of the CNVR approach includes the surveying of free-roaming dogs. This step is essential to best prepare for and measure the impact of CNVR, as well as to understand what kind of dogs live on the street and what their needs might be: are they owned pets, pets who were abandoned, strays born in the street? What kind of health issues are they facing? Where do they live? How many are they?

Twice a day (early morning and late afternoon), a FOUR PAWS team drove a predetermined route. During surveying, the team does not interact with the dogs – no stopping, no feeding, no touching. Studying at a distance, they dutifully note the locations and numbers of dogs. These estimates serve to measure the scale of the issue and the impact the CNVR program has. Observing the size of these groups and understanding their relationship with the human community is key for a successful management program. In addition to street surveying, FOUR PAWS collects data from local shelters and households.

Vlad himself stays connected the community, answering as many calls as he can. He also occasionally drives around, leaving food for the dogs.

Many dogs we met along those feeding routes already bore the distinctive ear tag that identifies them as sterilized, a testament to the Sisyphean effort led by animal welfare people here.

Vlad carried a large – and smelly – bag of chicken feet. He would call the dogs out, and a bunch would emerge from the surrounding tall grass, abandoned buildings and industrial sites, to feast on the stinky snacks. The dogs mostly kept their distances, snatching the feet Vlad would toss in the air, but some dared taking the food directly out of Vlad's hand. I could tell this made him proud, and I could relate. Moments like these are a touching reminder of the powerful bond that unites us to dogs. A bond built on mutual trust.

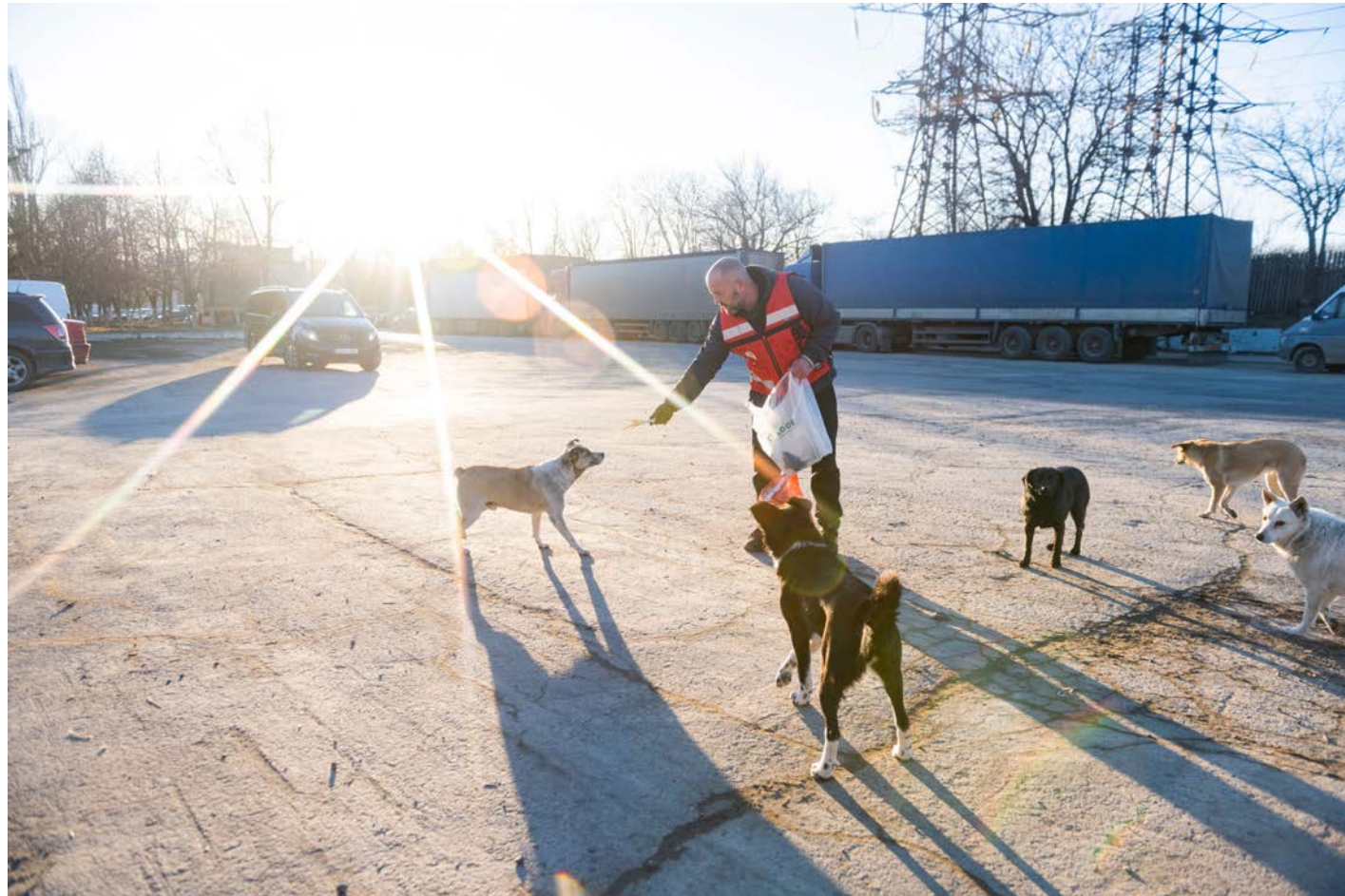






Sometimes, I muse about the secret lives of stray dogs, how they feel, what they want. Are they experiencing joy? How often do they play? Is their life a constant struggle for survival, or could they thrive?

Could stray dogs successfully revert to a natural, wild state and survive without human intervention?



Before heading to Moldova, the emotional challenges linked to CNVR were not lost on me, but as I studied the data-driven process in preparation for my trip, I considered it to be a very acceptable, humane solution to impossible circumstances. Given the scale and urgency of the problem in Moldova, I thought it made sense to deal with it statistically, almost cold-heartedly, looking at numbers, processing dogs one after the other.

Yet, once on the ground with Vlad, once my eyes met these dogs and felt their spirits, things got a lot more complicated, and my rationale fell apart. While I understood why the local community, overrun with strays, saw them as a problematic, anonymous whole – and to be fair, large groups of stray dogs can be dangerous, as evidenced by [Chişinău bite statistics](#) -, I just couldn't help but connect to the individuals.



Contrary to a general belief, dogs do not organize in packs like wolves. A pack centers around a breeding couple and is composed of their offspring and other non-breeding adults. That's not how dogs organize. They can, however, operate in groups, which are looser social structures. Dog groups are thought to be brought together by resources (food, shelter, or a female in heat for example), but are generally considered to be individualistic and opportunistic, qualities they might have inherited from their human teachers.

But what if we opened our minds to the idea that dogs have far richer social lives? What if their bonds were more complex than we like to admit, and driven by concepts of friendship, protectiveness, hatred, or love?

Observing the groups we visited, I imagined bonds beyond the mere survival of each individual. For a split second I felt sadness over the sterilization of these dogs. Part of me thought: if we sterilize the dogs, we interfere with their social lives. There will be less dogs, which means the remaining street dogs, as their population dwindles, will end up very lonely and struggle to find friends? It was a fleeting thought, silly even, and I knew it wasn't entirely rational – or scientific – and I brushed it away quickly. “We *want* less dogs roaming” I reminded myself. They *deserve* better.

I thought of Amy, a dog I photographed a decade ago in Puerto Rico. She was always with her bestie Cindy. The pair roamed together. Amy was in very rough shape, but never let us close enough to help her. One day, the pair was separated when Cindy was captured and later adopted away in New York. I feared this decision to separate them was a mistake. But the reasoning of the rescuer was that Cindy deserved a fair chance. For months after that, I saw Amy deteriorate slowly. She seemed so lonely, her appearance was ghastly, her nails were horrifically overgrown, her paws so swollen she could barely walk, she smelled like death, even from tens of feet away. She needed help but never let us approach. Then one day, she was gone. How I wish I could go back in time with a blowpipe and a few darts...



Photo from my Puerto Rico archives. Amy and Cindy, the day Cindy (left) was captured.



Towards the end of the day in Moldova, I was confronted to perhaps the biggest emotional downside of CNVR.

As the sun reached the golden hour, we approached a factory. Vlad called out and about 15 dogs emerged from the area. Then, two minuscule puppies waddled towards me, their shy tail wagging furiously. One of them insisted on hiding underneath me, between my feet. He was adorable, precious, vulnerable, and it was excruciating not to pick him up.

We walked back to the car and both teeny puppies chased us playfully. They were so innocent and beautiful. Vlad looked at me, shrugging his shoulders in a powerless motion. We slammed the car's door and drove away. In the mirror, I caught the puppies looking back at us.

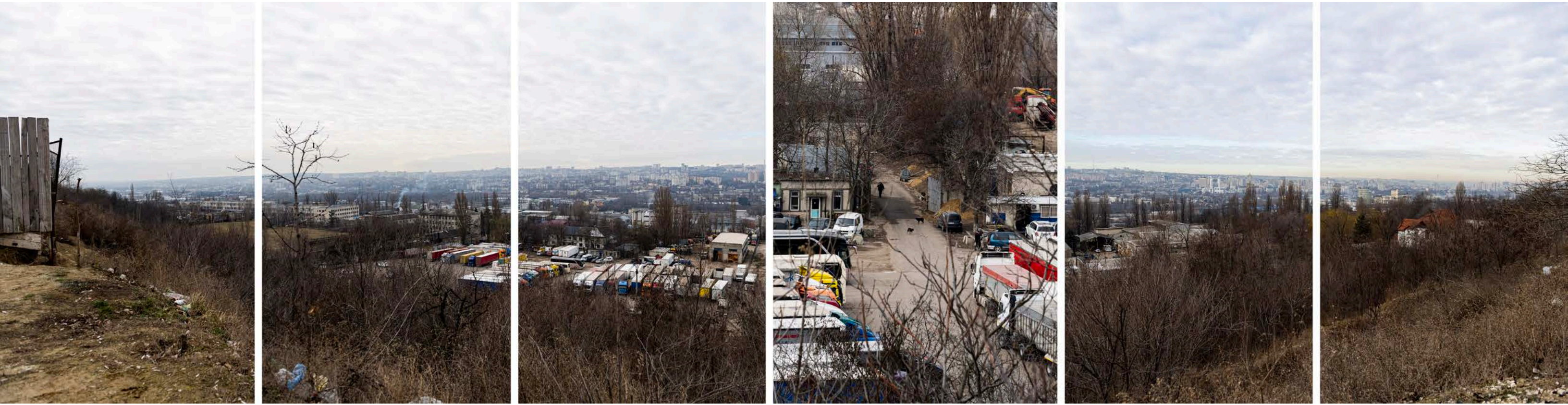
I tried not to think about the puppies too much. There was just no room for them at the shelter. But leaving them out there felt awful. Rescuers leave dogs behind all the time. It's part of the harsh reality of the job. But this is when the CNVR conundrum hit me the hardest.

For CNVR to make sense, Doctor Vet and FOUR PAWS must stick to the plan and dedicate their limited resources to their goal, the bigger picture: the sterilization of as many dogs as possible. Taking dogs in can only devour resources and clog the system.

As heartbreaking as it is, Vlad cannot take all the dogs in. He simply cannot afford to. He must stay the course.



3.
REBUILDING THE BOND
BETWEEN MOLDOVANS
AND THEIR DOGS



From high above, in all its shades of concrete and winter colors, Chişinău appeared surprisingly quiet and sprawled out. In the distance, far, far away between large trucks, I spotted two familiar silhouettes. Dogs.



At the heart of the [founding legend of Moldova](#) is a dog named Molda. She belonged to Dragoș, a Romanian voivode in the 14th century. Dragoș loved hunting, and Molda was his favorite dog.

One day, Dragoș and 300 huntsmen crossed from Hungary to the East, through a passage in the mountains, and came across an auroch (a now-extinct large wild ox). They pursued him, striking him, descending to the foot of the mountains where they reached a beautiful, unoccupied region. The brave Molda chased the injured auroch into a river and was swallowed up by the strong waters. To honor his beloved dog, Dragoș named the river – and later the principality: Moldova.



A typical Moldovan street dog, according to Vlad.



Today in Moldova, this bond defined by loyalty and love between Man and Dog, is compromised. Poverty and hardship make it difficult for people to care for their dogs. Even if they want to, they have so little resources to do so. “This is the biggest problem I see, as a shelter and clinic owner” Vlad explained. “Our country is so poor, people generally cannot afford to treat their own pets, let alone stray animals. When they see an animal in need, they ignore them because they know they cannot help. Even if they have the money to, they just don’t know how to help.”

While Vlad understands the limitations faced by the community, he also thinks people must bear responsibility and do better. “We are trying to teach people that humans are the ones who created the problem of stray dogs, so it is our responsibility to fix this. All people have empathy. They need to understand that animals have feelings and feel pain too. People shouldn’t look away when a dog is in need. Unfortunately, without our help, these dogs won’t survive in the streets. I wish for all dogs to find loving homes.”

Vlad would also like to see the country’s officials implement a system of breeding licenses, to limit the amount of breeding that’s taking place. His biggest dream is to get enough funding to acquire a mobile veterinary clinic to service the community and open a hotline so that people feel empowered to help animals.

Driving around Chişinău as an outsider, it is hard to ignore the problem. Stray dogs are noticeable everywhere. They sleep right by the roads. They find their way through traffic.



The city of Chişinău is very aware of the issue but so far, officials have failed at addressing it humanely and successfully. The mayor [took Facebook in 2021](#) to voice his frustration after a child was bitten by a stray dog. He called animal activists “anti-people” and added “we cannot put animals above the security and health of people.” The statement brought him the fury of Moldovan dog lovers, who cited examples of animal welfare initiatives around the world, and called for better solutions that protect both the humans and the dogs.

Chişinău’s municipal shelter (called Necropolis and nicknamed the *Kennel of Death* by animal activists) is managed by the same people in charge of garbage collection, and that says a lot about the way stray dogs have been seen and handled so far in Moldova – as a nuisance. It also means the staff is not trained to catch and handle the dogs appropriately and efficiently, as illustrated by a [2019 story](#) published on Oameni și Kilometri, a Moldovan news outlet. City hall employees say that only 10% of the dogs reported by residents are successfully captured ([source](#)).

It doesn’t help that animal welfare people still face resistance when it comes to sterilization. At a recent meeting with officials, activists were told the city was considering sterilizing female dogs and leaving the males intact. In many countries, this kind of gender biases hinders efforts to effectively manage stray dog populations.



Vlad was never able to ignore the suffering of stray dogs. He founded Doctor Vet Moldova about 20 years ago. While his commitment is a blessing for the dogs and community he serves, it's a heavy burden no private citizen should have to carry. "I get home after a long day at work, I eat dinner, I close my eyes and suddenly, it's already the next day".

There is also the lack of adoption culture. Dog lovers would rather get a “purebred” dog – a “status dog”, and not many want a mutt or a street dog – let alone a dog who is paralyzed or missing a leg. That is, perhaps, until they realize how precious the collaboration between humans and dogs can prove to be, as Vlad notices with hope.

“Dogs have a purpose in the community. Last year, crimes were on the rise and cars were often burglarized. The only areas where it was not happening, were areas with stray dogs. The thieves would just run away. This one stray dog lived in a building complex. Some people were unhappy about that and asked us to take him. First thing we did was sterilize the dog. Two days later, as the dog was recovering from the surgery, I got a call from the local guy who said, “please bring the dog back!” because during those two days, two flats were broken into and robbed. The whole building pleaded for the dog to come back.”

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*Vlad greets a dog who lives in a building complex.
Stray dogs seem to do ok when the community takes care of them.*

MORE INFORMATION

Four Paws International:

[Website](#) – [Donate to their stray dogs initiatives](#) – [Facebook](#) – [Instagram](#)

Doctor Vet Moldova:

[Facebook](#) – [Instagram](#) – Donate via PayPal at doctorvetmoldova@gmail.com

Sophie Gamand:

[Website](#) – [Instagram](#) – [Facebook](#)