

# A country beyond its border: Drivers and impacts of migration in the Republic of Moldova

Matteo Masotti, Francesca Crivellaro, Andrei Lucian Turlea, Elisa Iori and Matteo Vittuari

The Republic of Moldova is a small, landlocked country that, since the late 1990s, has been affected by increasing migration outflows resulting in a massive emigration shock. In the aftermath of independence in 1991, early migratory waves involved workers who had lost their jobs, mostly in the industrial and services sectors. In the ensuing three decades, however, migration has progressively become an option for rural populations as

well. Most studies conducted by academic institutions and international organizations emphasize that the most relevant economic factors determining migration are related to low income due to lack of employment and reduced opportunities to improve individual professional or social status (Drbohlav et al. 2017; Manic 2019; Mekvabishvili and Atanelishvili 2017; European Training Foundation 2015; IOM 2018).



Niscani Town Hall, Moldova (photo: Matteo Masotti).



Outmigration in this context is considered circular, long-term and short-term mobility. Long-term migration to Russia and Romania has been common since the early 1990s, as the two destinations had lower migration costs in terms of language and legal and institutional barriers. Russia and Romania, with slightly less than 300,000 residents born in the Republic of Moldova, have the largest number of Moldovan migrants (United Nations Population Division 2021). However, after 2005, the number of residents born in the Republic of Moldova also rose in other European countries such as Italy and France (United Nations Population Division 2021).

As for temporary migration, education and skills play an important role in the choice of destination. While the better educated go to the European Union (EU) and other overseas destinations, even in the short term, individuals with low skills or the unemployed tend to choose Russia. Rewards from migration to Russia are potentially lower than in the EU. However, the institutional and sociocultural similarities and ties between some social and linguistic groups in Moldova and Russia reduce migration costs allowing even less educated citizens to move.

Conversely, short-term migration to EU countries (excluding Romania) used to be accessible mainly to those with strong ties with Romania (and who could access citizenship), those who knew another EU language (e.g., French or English), and those with higher education. However, in recent years, international migration flows (including temporary migration) have shifted from the Russian Federation toward EU countries, establishing an ‘Europeanization’ of migration. The key factors explaining this trend are the decreasing migration costs to the EU (increased knowledge of English, changes in the visa regime for Moldovans in the EU, the adoption of the Eastern European Partnership by Moldova in 2021) and the parallel increased burdens of migrating to Russia (including legal and institutional migration restrictions).

The last decades also witnessed changes in the age and education levels of migrants since youth, including the highly educated, tend to migrate more than in the past, especially those who aim to finish their education abroad. In addition, the phenomenon of entire households migrating, including the elderly, is increasing.

## Drivers and impacts of migration in the Republic of Moldova: Results from a field investigation

### The field research

The field research in Moldova was conducted through a household survey during the period January 4–21, 2021, with 11 focus groups and 33 direct in-depth interviews conducted

between September 2021 and January 2022. The household survey targeted 608 rural households, representative of the rural population, while the focus groups included 87 farmers living in rural Moldova, including the autonomous region of Gagauzia but excluding Transdnistria.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 33 stakeholders, including representatives from government and nongovernmental organizations, officers from international institutions, local administrators, and academics.

### Migration as a necessary coping strategy

Insights from the field research suggest that outmigration, considered as circular, long-term and short-term mobility, is a long-lasting and widespread phenomenon, and it has become a necessary form of livelihood diversification for people in rural areas over the last three decades. Both smallholders and farmers use migration to cope with several everyday challenges, including low purchasing power, difficulties in accessing the financial market to invest in agriculture, lack of job opportunities beyond agriculture, and low salaries in all sectors of the national labor market. Farmers and households interviewed highlighted the lack or decreasing quality of roads, internet connections, and welfare and education services, especially in rural areas far from the largest cities.

### An unattractive agriculture sector

In the agriculture sector, farmers identified drivers of migration. These include the levels of investment required to increase economic performance and replace losses due to adverse climatic conditions, the increase in production costs and consequent decrease in profits, the lack of workforce availability (itself a consequence of outmigration), lack of public agricultural infrastructure, the difficulties in accessing more profitable foreign markets, and the overall lack of State support.

Interviews and focus groups also allowed exploration of the key challenges farmers and rural households face in maintaining effective livelihood strategies, considered one of the most important drivers of migration. The primary challenge noted was a general reduction in purchasing power, ascribed to different and sometimes interrelated elements. Those elements are perceived as internal and exogenous to the agriculture sector and are outlined below.

Internal challenges range from the rising costs of agricultural activities pushed up by the cost of inputs and labor to the lack of access to the financial market for investment in farming activities at reasonable rates. The low profitability of agriculture is also ascribed to the overwhelming role of intermediaries, which is a direct consequence of the difficulty in accessing markets, leading to lower market prices and forcing agricultural producers to reduce their profit margins. In addition, farmers highlighted the lack of infrastructure for

<sup>1</sup> Northern Region: Singerei district, Edineț district, Soroca district, Dondușeni district; Central Region: Călărași district, Nisporeni district, Orhei district, Ungheni district; Southern Region: Cantemir district, Cahul district.



food storage and processing which limits the profitability of farms and contributes to the fragmentation of land plots, making it more difficult to work efficiently and profitably. Poor profits from agriculture were also sometimes ascribed to the lack of an entrepreneurial culture among Moldovan citizens.

As exogenous factors, farmers highlighted the increasing cost of services and welfare and the lack of direct access to export markets, which are often more profitable than internal equivalents, paired with the high competition between local and foreign products that are consistently cheaper, though of lower quality, in the national market.

### Lack of local labor opportunities beyond agriculture

Since agriculture represents the main employment opportunity in Moldova, for most farmers it represents the only way to generate or integrate income. Agriculture has also become a viable option for migrants who return home. For others, the choice to farm is informed by key cultural elements such as carrying on a family tradition, attachment to the homeland, satisfaction in seeing results from hard work, the possibility of doing the job one has studied for, and satisfaction from cultivating genuine products.

Farmers perceive agriculture as a traditional activity, which is unattractive to younger generations because it is considered too labor demanding (some farmers reproduced the rhetoric that depicts young people as not hardworking) or because of the incompatibility of agricultural activities with an education achieved in a different subject domain.

Generally, farmers identify the lack of off-farm job opportunities as one of the main reasons underpinning youths' decisions to migrate, and the difference between local and 'foreigner' salaries as one of the main reasons for their decision to settle in destination countries. At the same time, many farmers also perceive agriculture as part of a family tradition; some depicted it as an activity worth investing in and a way of avoiding migration.

### Generating ambivalent feelings and complex impacts

Moldovan farmers and smallholders seem to have ambivalent feelings about the impact of outmigration on rural livelihoods. On the one hand, returnees and farmers with indirect migration experience acknowledged how remittances were pivotal in financing agricultural activities and in supporting household income. In addition, migration emerged as a source of increased household access to health care and, to a lesser extent, education.

In contrast, several farmers emphasized the long-term side-effects of continuing outmigration from Moldova in terms of labor force shortages and decreasing quality of infrastructure and welfare services. At the same time, some farmers declared that the quality of services provided by the State had decreased as emigration triggered a 'brain and care drain.'

Data from our research also demonstrated the impact of migration on intra-communal dynamics, explicitly addressing relationships between migrants and those left behind. While in the past, migration led to a decrease in caring for children



Rural landscape in Soroca near Nistru River, Moldova (photo: Matteo Masotti).

and pushed migrant families into transnational parenting, changing migration patterns and the 'care drain' they cause increasingly affect the elderly. For several farmers, the possibility of aging without the support of their children and grandchildren is a real worry, but they are aware that younger generations have better economic opportunities abroad. Their fear is that distance may weaken both family bonds and community solidarity.

Finally, migration in Moldova can be examined from the perspective of its impact on local institutions and their role in the country's long-term development. Local institutions are deeply involved in migration and play a prominent role in managing it. At a general level, most farmers complained about the State's inefficiency and, in some cases, corruption.

Others acknowledged the many initiatives that national and local institutions have been promoting in the last decade to foster rural development. Small and medium farmers who associate together, either formally or informally, appeared to be more aware of the programs, funds and international projects available in the country. Although farmer associations and cooperatives may work as development brokers and as a channel to voice farmers' concerns with public institutions, results appear uneven. In some cases, the existence of the association does not automatically entail the active participation of its members, while in others, collaboration is limited to specific activities, such as training courses. More demanding and challenging collective initiatives, including investing resources in agricultural infrastructure, were perceived as far from being realized.

## References

- Drbohlav, D.; Bailey, A.J.; Čermák, Z.; Čermáková, D.; Lozovanu, D.; Masná, E.; Pavelková, L.; Seidlová, M.; Stojanov, R.; Valenta, O.; Vietti, F. 2017. Diversification trends in Moldovan international migration: Evidence from Czechia and Italy. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Geographica* 52(2):237–248. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23361980.2017.19>
- European Training Foundation. 2015. *Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective (MISMES): Republic of Moldova*. Turin, Italy: European Training Foundation.
- IOM (International Organization for Migration). 2018. *Extended migration profile of the Republic of Moldova*. Chisinau, Moldova: International Organization for Migration, Mission to Moldova.
- Manic, M. 2019. The regional effects of international migration on internal migration decisions of tertiary-educated workers. *Papers in Regional Science* 98(2):1027–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12379>
- Mekvabishvili, E.; Atanelishvili, T. 2017. Personal remittances in the post-soviet countries (comparative analysis). *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences* 11(3):157–163.
- United Nations Population Division. 2021. *International migration stock*. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> (accessed March 13, 2023).

### AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

This policy brief is one in a series of briefs produced as part of the AGRUMIG project.

#### Authors:

Matteo Masotti, Andrei Lucian Turlea, Elisa Iori and Matteo Vittuari, all from the Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy; and Francesca Crivellaro, Department of Education Studies, University of Bologna, Italy.

#### AGRUMIG Project

The project titled **AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa** proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

**Donor:** European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (H2020) under grant agreement number 822730

(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

**Project website:** <http://agrumig.iwmi.org>

**For more information on the project, contact:** Angela Haynes, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK ([ah121@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ah121@soas.ac.uk))

This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>)

