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Return, readmission and reintegration of migrants. The case of Moldova.

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1. Forced return

The Republic of Moldova has one of the highest shares of remittances in GDP terms, in the world¹. Currently, on average, at any moment of the year, about 300,000 persons aged 15-64 years work or search for work abroad². From 2000³ to 2011 this number increased, on average, by 8% yearly. The highest rates were registered from 2000 to 2003, when the numbers stood at more than 25% yearly.

When in that period the poverty rate was about 70%⁴ and the average monthly salary offered by employers was about 35 EUR⁵, many Moldovans decided to risk labour migration.

At that time, for Moldovans, traveling to countries, other than CIS⁶ countries proved very difficult, in terms of the financial resources needed and the legal requirements to fulfill, especially if trying to find a job abroad.

Usually, labour-migrants were going to non-CIS countries as tourists, members of sport teams, religious or cultural groups, etc. using valid short-term visas. They were staying in destination-countries even after the expiration of their visas. Other labour migrants were traveling with false visas or even traversing borders in forests, at river crossings, etc.

In these conditions many Moldovan labour migrants were removed from the non-CIS countries, especially EU countries.

Unfortunately, till 2006 only the administrative records on the distribution of migrants by destination-countries are available. According to these data about 70% of migrants were going to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. About 13% of Moldovan migrants went to Germany. Another important destination-country was the U.S. (about 13% of migrants)⁷. Administrative data cover only the emigrants that go abroad for residence.

1.1. Forced return from the EU

According to data available from Eurostat, in 2002 there were about 21.4 thousand Moldovan citizens in the EU, most of them in Germany (65%) and Romania (24%).

In the same year, 2383 Moldovans were removed from the EU area, mostly from Germany (49%), Czech Republic (14%), Hungary (14%) and Poland (9%).

In 2011, the number of Moldovan migrants in the EU and their distribution by countries changed significantly. Most of 191 thousand migrants, were in Italy (69%). The number of Moldovans removed from the EU decreased to 1860, most of them were removed from Romania (34%) and the United Kingdom (14%).

The decrease of the number of Moldovans removed from the EU was influenced mainly by two factors:

¹ World Bank Bilateral Migration matrix, available at www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances.

² Labour Force Survey estimate for 2011.

³ Labour Force Survey is the only source offering continuously estimates of the number of labour migrants. The survey was launched in 2000. Before 2000 only administrative records of migration flows are available.

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics

⁶ Commonwealth of Independent States (11 country, former members of the USSR).

⁷ Data computed using administrative records of yearly flows of migrants:

http://statbank.statistica.md/pxweb/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=POP0704_en&ti=Emigrants+by+country+of+destination%2C+sex+and+age+group%2C+2001%2D2011+&path=../Database/EN/02%20POP/POP07/&lang=3

- Authorities of destination-countries recognized that labour migrants are already an indispensable, necessary component of the society and sending them back home is not a solution. Consequently, many Moldovan labour migrants used the opportunities offered by the Governments to legalize their stay. For example in 2008, in Italy⁸;
- Many Moldovan labour migrants used their right and regained the Romanian citizenship, which offers the right to freely move across the EU⁹;

Still, according to a survey conducted in 2008, about 33% of Moldovan labour migrants in the EU were staying illegally. Migrants say that if not making troubles, authorities don't take actions to remove the person, especially if the person works in specific activities (ex. taking care of elderly).

In 2007 Moldova signed an readmission agreement with the EU. Within this agreement 110 Moldovan citizens were readmitted in 2010, 126 in 2011 and 41 in 2012.

1.2 Forced return from the U.S.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security only 8 Moldovans¹⁰ were removed from the U.S in 2002. This number increased to 60 in 2011. Removals increased suddenly from 16 in 2007, to 45 in 2008. There are no additional data, but most probably it's about students traveling to the U.S. within work and travel programs. About 20% of them, according to the U.S. embassy in Moldova, do not return and choose to stay illegally in the U.S.

1.3 Forced return from Russia

Data on removals from Russia are more difficult to find. Given the fact that having a valid passport and a train ticket, Moldovans could travel to and stay in Russia freely, the number of Moldovans removed from Russia couldn't be high.

Of course, Russian immigration law imposes some restrictions for citizens of CIS countries. But in the beginning of 00's the law was less restrictive and as labour migrants tell, like in any post-communist country, those whose duty was to make the law work, used it mostly for personal gain. In these conditions, most Moldovan labour migrants were paying to policemen to avoid removal¹¹.

Today many labour migrants still pay to avoid removal from Russia, mainly those working as employees. Usually the employer pays a bribe to the officer of the Federal Migration Service.

According to migrants there's also another, indirect, way of paying to avoid removal. For a fee, an employee of the railway company could pass the migrant's passport through the custom service and get the stamps that prove that the migrant, after staying three months in Russia, left and returned legally, therefore having the right to stay other three months.

Of course, while the passport travels, the migrant works in Russia.

⁸ In 2008 the number of valid permits issued to Moldovan citizens was 103 thousand, in 2009 it was 34% higher (Eurostat data).

⁹ According to a Soros Foundation Romania study, about 227 thousand Moldovan citizens regained the Romanian citizenship between 1991 and 2011

¹⁰ Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Deportable Alien Control System (DACS), Enforcement Case Tracking System (ENFORCE), July 2007.

¹¹ Unfortunately there are no empirical data to support that.

Given the high degree of informality on the labour market¹² and corruption in Russia¹³ it's expected that administrative records on removals from Russia shouldn't give high numbers of Moldovans forced to return home.

2. Voluntary return

When speaking about return of migrants back to Moldova, two groups of migrants should be considered: the one of repatriates and the one of labour migrants.

For repatriation can apply citizens of Moldova who emigrated for permanent residence abroad, their descendants, or non-Moldovan citizens who lived continuously at least 10 years in Moldova. These persons have the right for permanent residence in Moldova.

Yearly, according to administrative records, between 2000 and 2011, on average about 1460 repatriates were registered. Most repatriates came from Russia (53%) and Ukraine (32%).

Unfortunately, the available data don't offer the possibility to see how many of them are those who left Moldova and returned back and how many are simply descendants of Moldovan citizens who decided to settle in Moldova.

Labour migrants are a numerous sub-group of population, about 300 thousand Moldovans (9% of total population), on average, work abroad at any given moment. Most of them work in Russia (65%) and Italy (18%).

Traveling from Moldova to Russia and back is affordable (50-90 Euro one-way ticket) and most of all Moldovans don't need visas. According to Russian law, Moldovan citizens can stay legally on the Russian territory for no more than three months and in some conditions for one year.¹⁴ Consequently, all Moldovan labour migrants have to return. But there are several ways to avoid traveling to Moldova every three months (see the previous chapter).

Still, it's hard to imagine that there are many Moldovans who don't return from Russia at least once per year. About half of labour migrant working in Russia could be considered circular migrants¹⁵ who come to Moldova periodically, mostly in autumn and winter.

Returning from the EU is more difficult and more expensive. Returning to Moldova is reasonable for labour migrants who stay legally in the EU. Those staying illegally risk to be removed without a chance to return back to their jobs. Although, even in these cases there are ways to return to Moldova, then back to the EU (ex. using the "white passport"¹⁶).

An estimated number of 18 thousand labour migrants working in Italy could be considered circular migrants (31%). Usually, they come to Moldova in August, during vacation.

A labour migration survey conducted in the 2008, estimated a number of 72 thousand returned migrants (23% of all labour migrants). About 25% of returned migrants came to Moldova for vacation, 19% to make some documents, 17% for family-related reasons and 13% for health-related reasons.

¹² According to the ILO, the share of persons employed in the informal sector, in non-agricultural activities is about 12% (2010 estimate).

¹³ Transparency International: Corruption Perception Index in 2011 was 2,4 (rank 143 of 182)

¹⁴ Except for high-skilled workers. They can stay there for up to three years.

¹⁵ Estimated based on LFS panel data (2010).

¹⁶ The migrants go to the consulate in the countries they work in, claiming that they lost their passport. They receive a document that allows travelling to Moldova. In this way, they avoid deportation and interdiction to re-enter the country.

Only 6% of returned migrants returned to Moldova because they achieved their goals and they wanted to return.

3. Reintegration of returned labour migrants

In 2008, the above mentioned labour migration survey estimated that 20% of returned migrants had no intentions to go abroad, for work, again. On average these migrants were 37 years old, mainly men (69%), mostly from Russia (71%) and Italy (10%).

At the moment of the survey the employment rate of returned migrants with no intentions to go abroad was 45%: higher than for returned migrants willing to go abroad (23%) and slightly lower than the national average for persons aged 15 years and over (47%).

The unemployment rate was 15%, much higher than for returned migrants willing to go abroad (5%) and the national average (3%).

These figures clearly indicate that returned labour migrants, once decided to stay in Moldova, actively try to reintegrate into the labour migrant.

The high unemployment rate also indicates that unemployed returned migrants either find more difficult a job or are more selective during job-search (trying to find a better-paid job).

On average, returned migrants working as employee were yearning a salary 20% lower than the national average. Again, this could mean two different things: either returned migrants are more desperate to get a job and accept a lower salary or they accept lower-paid jobs (with are easy to get) because they have savings or receive remittances from a household member.

The Government in partnership with international organizations implemented a program to support returned migrants who would like to start a business¹⁷. Migrants are assisted to invest their skills and savings. The program informs the migrants about its advantages, trains them and offers 50% of the money needed to start/develop a business. The name of the program stands from the idea that for each Leu¹⁸ of remittances invested by migrants, the Government will offer an additional Leu. In 2011 the program assisted 73 projects, offering about 1.1 million USD. Unfortunately, not many migrants apply, they prefer to return abroad to running a business in Moldova. Buying apartments or building houses is considered a more secure investment.

Besides economical integration, returned migrants (mainly those returned from the EU) have to get used back with the daily life in Moldova. Most disturbing for them is the high degree of informality: there are clear rules/procedures on how to interact with institutions/organizations but in many cases these rules/procedures stay only on paper.

¹⁷ „PARE 1+1” governmental program, <http://www.odimm.md/ro/pare/default.htm>

¹⁸ Currency in Moldova (MDL)