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Migration Issue in Programs and Platforms of Political Parties in Moldova

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Abstract

Over the last decade the labour migration has become a defining feature of social, economic and political life in Moldova. Remittances sent by Moldovan migrants appeared critical in fueling country's consumption-based economic growth and driving thousands of Moldovan families out of poverty. On the flip side, Moldovan economy became dependent on these remittances, labour shortages became pronounced while social fabric came under serious stress. No less important, in the last years importance of Moldovan diaspora came to the fore: both as a source of electoral support and financial capital to support investment.

Despite the omnipresence of the phenomenon, political parties' platforms reflect these realities to limited extent. The former ruling Communists' party, ousted from power in 2009, has been reluctant to politically recognize critical role of migration in underpinning country's economic growth throughout period of its rule (2001-2009). This reluctance is striking against the backdrop of extensive cooperation between the Communist government and international organization aimed at putting in place nation system of migration management. The former opposition parties, now members of ruling coalition, have been eager to highlight the shortcomings of the remittance-driven economic growth during the period of Communist rule. However, on the programmatic level they essentially focused on the same issues as the Communist party did in practice during its rule: legalization of labour migration, attracting migrants and remittances back in Moldova in order to support investment-based economic growth and working closely with the EU in order to facilitate travel of Moldovan citizens to the EU. All in all, this should facilitate policy-making process on the migration issue.

The labour emigration is a lasting and a deeply embedded feature of Moldova's economic and social life. More and more present since the end of '90 as a response to rising poverty in the aftermath of protracted post-Communist transition and Russian financial turmoil of 1998 it has become a defining trait in the second half of 2000's. Indeed, by 2007 when migration seemingly reached its apex the remittances sent by Moldovan migrants were tantamount to one third of the country's GDP, around one quarter of labour force migrated abroad, while from 1999 to 2004 roughly 40% of population moved out of poverty (World Bank 2011). With all this benefits migration poses serious risks for development of the country, such as labour shortages, remittance-depending growth and 'Dutch' disease as well as family stress. At the same time Moldovan Diaspora abroad is often seen as source of capital and entrepreneurship to spur Moldova's development, as well as an important pool for votes. For instance, in the last parliamentary elections of 2010 Diaspora votes (65500 overall) added 2 mandates to ruling coalition and helped it to defeat the Communists' opposition. As both development and electoral impact of migration is set to grow it would be useful to see how stance of different parties on migration has evolved on programmatic level.

The political landscape has evolved a lot during last 20 years. It is enough to say that from all parties active in the 90's only one survived and has continued playing significant role in the last decade. Other current important parties were either established in the last 5 years or evolved so much that have little or no connection to their legal predecessors. This fact allows us to shorten timeframe for analysis.

In the nutshell, current Moldovan party system looks as follows:

Since 2009 Moldova has been governed by coalition government (based on four parties up to end of 2010 and three parties since then). The current ruling coalition set-up includes (from left to right): Democratic Party (DP, 15 mandates), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, 31¹), and Liberal Party (LP, 12). In Parliament there is only one opposition party, the Communists' Party. This party ruled Moldova from 2001 to 2009. The extra-parliamentary parties are many in number, but have very limited clout in the political discourse of the country. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on the parties represented in the Parliament.

Let us start tackling official party positions in reverse order. The *Communists' Party* came to power in 2001 amidst dire economic situation and in the aftermath of early elections stemming from political crisis. The ascension to power of the party coincided in time with the explosion of outwards migration from Moldova² that further on underpinned economic recovery in the country. Despite the fact that under the party's rule the labour emigration became a fully-fledged trend, there is little mentioning of this phenomenon in the party's document. The Program (PCRM 2008) mentions migration only once, while the latest electoral platform omits the issue altogether (PCRM 2010). This situation is surprising since in the years of the party's rule the migration management in Moldova evolved significantly. Furthermore, despite the fact that Party's rhetoric was somewhat negative towards labour emigration since it actually underscored the fact that economic recovery was jobless (former Prime-minister Vasile Tarlev even once declared migration a caprice, defying the fact that it were actually lack of jobs and huge wage gap between Moldova and destination countries driving Moldovan labour migrants abroad), on the ground significant job was done with the involvement of the international development community to laid fundament for the migration management framework (Mosneaga 2007). As opposite to rhetoric, the Communist government worked extensively on legalization of migration flows, bilateral cooperation with destination countries on facilitation of labour migration, improving institutional framework to manage migration flows both in and out of Moldova. These efforts were further supported by various cooperation initiatives between Moldova

¹ One MP left Party later on.

² Ironically enough, the Party lost power against the backdrop of contraction of migration outflows and remittances' inflows in the aftermath of global financial crisis of 2008.

and the EU, underpinned by the Action Plan between both parties. Further in 2000's the emphasis was put on attracting Moldova migrants (or at least their money) back to fuel economic growth of the country. All in all, these efforts showed a tacit acknowledgement by the Communist government that labour emigration had a flip-side too.

Given the obvious predicaments of the consumption-led and jobless economic growth that development model became a centerpiece of the then-in-opposition parties' critique towards Communists' party. Little surprise then, their program documents reflect the migration issue to a larger extent. However, these party documents also show a large degree of convergence of the opposition "liberal" parties and incumbent Communists' party. The programs adopted by coalition party members both before and after 2009 underscore the following major goals (PLDM 2011, PDM 2010, LP 2010):

1. Free movement via visa liberalization with the EU (LDP, LP)
2. Legalization of migration and protection of labour migrants working abroad (LDP, DP, LP)
3. Attract migrants back to overcome 'brain drain' (LDP)
4. Attracting remittances as investments (DP)
5. Rural developments and/or overall job creation as a tool to make countryside more attractive place to live in and to return to (DP, LDP, LP)
6. Risks posed by migrants to the national pension system (DP)

To sum up, the approaches of coalition parties towards migration phenomenon do not appear very comprehensive on the programmatic level. However, they are quite similar and compatible. This should facilitate policy-making process on the migration issue. From programmatic perspective, there is little room for conflict between ruling coalition and opposition party on the migration issue as the programmatic goals focus on the migration-development nexus and legalization of Moldovan migrants abroad: need to legalize and protect migrants, facilitate liberalization of visa regime for travelling to the EU, attract migrants and their money back home for the sake of development, etc. The issues related to immigration are low or absent on the parties' agendas.

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