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Leaving or staying behind – the two faces of Moldova

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Abstract:

The article introduces the problem of migration from Moldova, Europe's poorest country, in the southeast of the continent. It discusses the consequences of migration for both those who are leaving and those left behind and pays special attention to the problem of human trafficking.

I made the acquaintance of Mihai, the coach driver, when I was working in Moldova with a group of experts focusing on migration and the sad aspect of human trafficking. Mihai had just returned from the Czech Republic, where he had been working in construction. Working abroad or staying behind is a reality that the people of Moldova are constantly confronted with.

Although direct bus connections run twice a week between the two countries, Moldova is not much known in the Czech Republic, or elsewhere. It has today the population of roughly 3 million, which has been decreasing continuously since the early 1990s. Before gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic enjoyed preferential treatment, probably as a way to assure higher loyalty towards Moscow. However, since mid-1990s independent Moldova has been rated the poorest country in Europe. A 2006 UN-report declared Moldova to be the world's second most dependent state in terms of remittances from nationals working abroad - more than 60% of the population live today from remitted money. Due to the decline of the agricultural sector – around one million people have left the country, many of them to work illegally. Men, who work in construction, go predominantly to Russia; women, working in domestic care, and also the young, mostly go to Italy. Many of Moldova's migrants are close to the regular age of retirement when circumstances force them to migrate in order to do physically demanding and often unsafe work. Moldova is currently the one country in Europe with the greatest number of its citizens working abroad in relation to its population.

Back in the Soviet times, the MSSR was the most densely populated Soviet republic. Nowadays many villages are nearly empty or are inhabited solely by old people and children, who commonly have not seen their parents for five years or more¹. Alongside the privately organised brain drain, official state institutions like the regional government of Quebec run advertising campaigns offering jobs abroad. Commercial advertising campaigns propagating migration to the Czech Republic are also becoming more obvious in newspapers and on billboards in Chisinau.

The dire economic situation is not only the result of the developments of the last decade and a half, but also of political decision-making. Although some positive steps have been taken by EU states – e.g. more and more embassies opened², budgets set aside for development assistance for Moldova are minuscule (e.g. in Germany or Britain) - a far cry from what other developing countries in Africa or South America receive. When in 2006 and 2007 Russia instituted an import restraint upon Moldovan products as a measure of applying political pressure, dozens of enterprises went bankrupt as a result. The largely incompetent communist government has denied chances to open new markets for Moldovan products and prefers dependency on Russia. Victory for the Communist Party in the February 2009 parliamentary elections is nevertheless probable, as the communists control and censor state radio and television and because those who know better have left the country long ago and will not return just for the sake of voting for the opposition. Although the economic situation is *slowly* getting *slightly* better, even many privileged relatives of national VIPs continue to number among the migrants.

Although the effect might seem obvious, it is rather hard to underestimate the impact massive migration really has on a country. There are few Moldovans today who do not have a relative abroad. Enormous sums – often several thousand Euro - are paid to receive illegal *legal* travel and residence documents necessary for getting to Western Europe. At the same time people continue to cross the borders in the most dangerous conditions, at night, swimming through rivers and crossing mountains, or locked in a container on a ship between the Baltic states and Ireland. Those who do not want to take these high risks prefer immigration to Russia, where Moldovans can enter without a visa. However, even in Russia it costs several hundred dollars to get (an often illegal) job, and to bribe the police. Legal paths usually end up in worse jobs, the sort that Russians had stopped doing long ago. The often depressing experience of migration has also turned into a subject for Moldovan theatre plays³ and has found its way into popular music.

The problem of migration has completely changed family relations in the country, with many children at a very young age – often just weeks after their birth – given to relatives, or into orphanages which are full of children with both parents alive but incapable of looking after them. Couples fall apart as men and women migrating alone frequently marry anew in their country of destination. Although the benefit from remittances is

¹ This applies to at least 170, 000 children.

² For example, the Italian embassy opened on 1 December 2008 in Chisinau.

³ see excerpt at the end of the article.

crucial for the survival of the Moldovan population, the social costs of migration are extremely high: children denied normal development in a family easily become a burden to society and most likely also victims of human trafficking.

Migrants more often than not do not return back home, as after years of difficulties in their host country they rarely want to give up all their achievements. Although most of them buy flats or houses for their parents or themselves in Chisinau, hardly any of them will live there. The influx of foreign money through remittances has the effect of making the cost of living in Moldova exaggerated. This concerns not just housing, but nearly all consumer goods, for which those without contacts abroad are completely unable to pay. Most single pensioners are therefore forced to live in disastrous conditions – pensions often not exceeding 30 Euro a month after forty years of work. The unemployment rate among young people is 14 %. All this drags even more people into migration - a seemingly unstoppable vicious circle affecting workers, academics, artists or doctors. Although new department stores open and streets are full of western cars, this is mere consumer decoration accessible to less than ten percent of Moldova's population and that the level of investment remains much too low.

Moldova usually appears in foreign media in the context of human or organ trafficking, problems far from being overcome. The number of victims of human trafficking are based only on estimates (currently between 500 to 1500 persons trafficked annually) as migrants seldom declare officially their absence from home. Victims of human trafficking are mainly girls and young women, who end up mostly in Turkey, Russia and other countries. The problem of trafficking of men (5% of all trafficked persons) for the purpose of unpaid labour and the trading of children (14%, among them babies from the age of five months upwards) has been underestimated for a long time. Although there is a state-run centre for fighting human trafficking, its success has been very limited and the US senate report⁴ criticised its performance harshly in 2008. Human traffickers – very often the victims' relatives, but also mafia-like organisations - are rarely subjected to legal proceedings, let alone sent to jail. Whereas the advocates of the victims receive a symbolic salary, the offenders' lawyers can be paid up to 30 times more.

It is probable that even high-ranking government officials are involved in trafficking. The greatest responsibility for dealing with the problem lies therefore with non-governmental organisations and international institutions. For example "La Strada" has established a free of charge non-stop hotline, where everyone interested in migrating legally or illegally for whatever purpose – including au-pair and similar volunteer schemes - can receive confidential information. It is usually women who consult this hotline; interestingly often on behalf of men - friends, relatives or husbands. Ignorance as to what can happen as a result of migration is widespread not only among naive youngsters but is characteristic for the society as a whole. The hotline is also open to victims calling from abroad asking for advice on how to escape from exploitation. The

⁴ US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report, released June 4, 2008. To view the report's comments on moldova visit: <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008/105388.htm>

International Organisation for Migration has recently succeeded in raising awareness about the effects of migration among and through religious institutions (e.g. the Orthodox Church) - which for years had kept silent about human trafficking. The Moldovan state only now begins slowly to give funds to NGOs solving social problems connected to migration. These have successfully created groups of young volunteers running seminars and providing counselling especially at school level.

Much needs to be done, and the quantity of victims returning with life-long traumas is still high, but at least to some extent the situation seems to have improved with different organisations starting to work in the field. Where in the past most victims of trafficking passed the frontiers illegally and their traders were extremely violent, nowadays at least the *legal* process of migration is respected – which is important as far as the victims' possibility to cross borders back to Moldova is concerned. NGO-based rehabilitation centres have started to provide support for victims; until very recently there was no state institution offering help on a similar level. Although there have been some positive changes, one of the essential problems remains – the attitude of Moldovan society towards the victims of human trafficking, most importantly towards girls and young women. Thus on the basis of strange pseudo-religious beliefs many of the victims are rejected on their return by their own families, adding to the wounds caused to them abroad. Victims of human trafficking and their relatives have almost no chance to get involved in prevention and in enlightening Moldovan society.

In the last couple of years several initiatives have tried to eliminate dangers of human trafficking and of migration by creating job opportunities especially for young women in the countryside. “Winrock International” runs a program facilitating basic economic instruction and allocates grants for small-business setups. Also radio and television programmes and documentaries are engaged in informing the public as knowledgeably as possible about aspects of migration and the possibilities to stay in the home country. However, as long as the Moldovan state and the international community are not interested in assuming their responsibility for a country with a dramatically shrinking population, things will not change.

As for Mihai, the coach driver, after one year in the Czech Republic he came back home. He could no longer bear the separation from his family. When asked if he would leave again, he said: no, never. A real exception to the rule since to be a Moldovan patriot is now harder than ever before.

Dumitru Crudu: No-one's people ⁵

A square in front of a bus station in Moldova. One bus after another is departing. Alexandru is among the passengers.

Alexandru: All the people are leaving Moldova. Nobody is willing to wait for better times, everybody is leaving.

The bus moves.

Alexandru: In many places only the elderly remain. [...] It costs a lot to leave. There are people who have become rich, selling false passports, visas. [...] we are leaving, we who want change, who want to live a decent life, who are ill of tuberculosis, with no teeth, with old parents, unemployed wives.

A bus station in Rome. People congratulate each other.

Alexandru: I left when I fell ill. I had two options: become a burden to my family or try to take care of myself. I have chosen the latter - Italy. I obtained a visa on the black market, and here I am!

Michael Wiersing, German-born author, has lived in France, Russia, Great Britain and South America. He currently works in Moldova, writing about history, society and politics. He is involved in various cultural projects, most recently in preserving the national Moldovan film heritage at the former Soviet republic "Moldova-Film" studio.

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Dumitru Crudu "Oameni ai nimănu", Cartier publishing house (Chişinău, Moldova). Excerpts from scene 1.

The play is about the experience of Moldovan migrants to Italy, it is based on real stories. The play was produced with the financial support of the IOM and staged at the Eugene Ionesco theatre in Chişinău