

THE EVOLUTION OF WAGES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA. THEIR IMPACT ON THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE LABOR MARKET

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Abstract: The consolidation of economic market relations in the Republic of Moldova led, on the one hand, to the diversification of the population's income forms, and on the other hand, to the reduction of the role of the salary in the formation of the population's income. Against the background of inflationary processes, privatization processes, other economic transformations in the context of the transition to the market economy of the 90's, there was a continuous process of reduction of the real wages of workers. Diminishing of the role of wages in the formation of the disposable income of the population in favour of other sources of income is a natural process under the conditions of the transition to the market economy. But when this decrease takes uncontrolled proportions, there can be a transfer of the reproduction function of the labor force from the salary to other forms of income, which are not directly related to a productive activity, such as the work activity. There is a **worsening** of the situation on the labor market, which manifests itself through a drastic decrease in occupational indicators, thus undermining the functioning mechanism of the national economy and the development of the existing human potential. In the situation where the salary no longer fulfils its basic economic and social functions, i.e. reproduction, motivation, stimulation of economic growth, the population no longer connects their work and employment needs to the labor market of the Republic of Moldova choosing labor markets from other countries where the salary conditions are more favourable. This fact has led to the intensification of international labor migration.

Keywords: salary, employees on the labor market, minimum wage, employment rate, fields of activity.

Classification JEL: J6

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of the labor market constitution in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the consolidation of economic market relations led to the elimination of the obligation of the economically active population to provide labor services in a mandatory manner and, therefore, to the people freedom to choose an alternative activity income-generating work. On the other hand, the mass privatization processes that took place in the 90s of the 20th century led to the drastic reduction of the activity of several enterprises and, therefore, to the sending of the personnel of the enterprises on unpaid leave, or even to their dismissal. All these processes generated, on the one hand, the increase of unemployment, especially the disguised one, and on the other hand, the diversification of the population's forms of income unrelated to any productive activity and the reduction of the role of the salary in the total available income of the population in favour of income from other types of activities. However, people laid off or sent on unpaid leave were forced to find other sources of income in order to survive.

The decreasing role of the salary in the formation of incomes, in favor of other sources of income, is a natural process in the new economic conditions. But when this decrease takes uncontrolled proportions, there can be a transfer of the reproduction function of the labor force from the salary to other forms of income, which are not directly related to the work activity. There is a degradation of the situation on the labor market, which manifests itself through a strong decrease in occupational indicators, thus undermining the functioning mechanism of the national economy and development of the existing human potential.

Under these conditions, the role of the state also became less obvious in regulating the wages of workers, this role being shared with employers, unions, employers, etc. Thus, the

processes in the field of income policy have become, for the most part, uncontrollable, and in the conditions of a weak functionality of the labor market in the Republic of Moldova, the salary is far from being determined by market forces.

A situation has been created in which the salary can no longer fulfill its basic economic and social functions, namely, reproduction, motivation, stimulation of economic growth. And the population of the Republic of Moldova does not connect their work and employment needs to the labor market of the Republic of Moldova, thus choosing the labor markets from other countries where the salary conditions and job guarantee are more favorable. This fact has led to a strong intensification of international labor migration.

Although in recent years salaries in the Republic of Moldova have registered a spectacular increase, they are still quite low compared to the countries in the region or in the European Union and appear more like a social allowance and not as the real price of labor force negotiated fairly by both parties to the employment contract.

Namely, because of these processes in the field of income policy, there is a continuous decrease of the occupational indicators, which will lead, in the future, to serious consequences for the entire national economy.

The object of this article is the analysis of salaries in the Republic of Moldova, their evolution during the period of transition to the market economy, explanation why they cannot be considered as a motivating factor for improving the situation on the labor market and increasing the level of employment. For a more in-depth analysis, a vast literature in the field was used, studies, monographs, articles, informative notes, official data of government institutions concerned with the issue of salaries in the Republic of Moldova. Statistical data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the National Bank, as well as some data taken from various national and international studies conducted in recent years were used.

2. SALARY – DEFINING ELEMENT OF THE LABOR MARKET

The liberalization processes on the labor market in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the current transition to the market economy, in addition to the fact that they determined the freedom of individuals in terms of their decision to provide work services or not, also led to the expansion of alternative forms of income-generating activities to the detriment of the provision of work services and, respectively, to the diversification of the population's forms of income. This fact led, in turn, to the reduction of the role of wages in the total disposable income of the population in favor of income from other types of activities. Under these conditions, the role of the state also became less decisive in regulating the wages of workers, this role being shared with employers, unions, employers, etc.

Thus, processes in the field of paying workers became uncontrollable, and wages began to be determined only apparently by market forces. However, in the situation where the mechanism of the labor market is extremely fragile, and the forces of the labor market do not manifest themselves in the most perfect way, the salary as the equilibrium price on the labor market can no longer fully realize its economic and social functions of basis, namely reproduction, motivation, stimulation of economic growth. For this reason, the salary is currently presented, rather, as a social allowance and not a real labor price negotiated fairly by both parties to the employment contract, thus leaving the scope of labor relations. Precisely thanks to these processes in the field of income policy, there is a continuous degradation of occupational indicators, which can lead, in the future, to serious consequences for the functionality of the national economy.

Under these conditions, a large part of employees, (mostly employed in the public sector) who form their income exclusively from salaries, are disadvantaged compared to other categories of the population who ensure the bulk of their income from other sources. This situation leads to the degradation of the motivation of salaried work and, consequently, to an exodus of the labor force from the productive sphere to other fields of activity, including, in the underground sector of

the economy, which registered during the years of transition to the market economy a rather impressive growth, or adding to the army of international labor migrants.

In general, the decrease in the role of wages in the formation of incomes, in favor of other sources of income, is a natural process under the conditions of the transition to the market economy. But when this decrease takes uncontrolled proportions, there can be a transfer of the reproductive function of the labor force from wages to other forms of income, which are not directly related to the labor process, thus undermining the functioning mechanism of the labor market and, in general, of the prospects for sustainable economic development.

Thus, if in economically developed countries the share of salary in total income, through various government policies, is maintained at a level of around 50-70%¹, thus ensuring the motivation of work, the high level of employment and, therefore, the increase in labor productivity and social justice, in the Republic of Moldova the share of the salary in the total income available in the Republic of Moldova only in 2019 reached the level of 50%.

It should be noted that the strongest degradation of occupational indicators was observed at the end of the 90s, the beginning of the 2000s, correlating with an extremely low level of the share of wages in the total disposable income of the population (37.8% in 2001). Over the years, against the background of the strengthening of the labor market functioning mechanism, the share of wages in the total disposable income of the population gradually began to increase. Thus, if in 2006 the share of the salary in the total disposable income of the population constituted 39%, in 2021 this indicator reached the level of 50.8% (Table 1).

Table 1. Average monthly disposable income per person by source of income, in 2006 and 2021, in %

	2006	2021
Salary activity	39,0	50,8
Social benefits	13,7	18,5
Individual agricultural activity	22,0	8,1
Individual non-agricultural activity	6,5	7,4
Property income	0,1	0,2
Other income (including transfers from outside the country 12.5%)	18,8	15,0

Source: National Bureau of Statistics

It should be noted that the share of wages in the Gross Domestic Product in 2020 constituted 43.9%.

The sharp decrease in the share of wages in the total income of the population, as well as in the GDP in the first years of the transition to the market economy, was largely determined by the extremely low level of wages inherited from the socialist economy, and the increase in the level of wages in recent years it also determined the increase in the share of wages in the total income of the population.

However, the increase in the share of wages in the total income of the population did not generate any increase in the level of employment in the Republic of Moldova. According to the data of the Labor Force Survey, the employment rate in the Republic of Moldova during the last 15 years oscillates around the level of 40%.

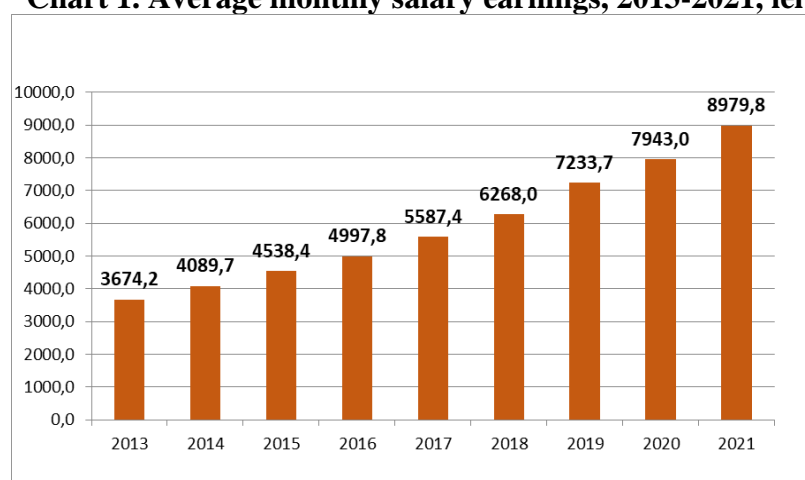
¹ А. Рофе, „Экономика туда”, М., МГУ, 2010.

3. EVOLUTION OF WAGES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Analysing the salaries in the Republic of Moldova at the present, it can be seen that they continue to be extremely low compared to the level of salaries in neighbouring countries or in the countries of the European Union. Thus, the average gross monthly salary in the Republic of Moldova in 2021 was about 8979.8 lei or 502.48 USD, the lowest level among European countries. In the 2nd quarter of 2022, it reached the value of 10376.2 lei, 14% higher than in the same period of the previous year.

Although during the last years the average salary in the Republic of Moldova has registered significant increases, it continues to be low. The growth of the average gross salary in the economy increased from 2013 to 2021 from 3674.2 lei to 8979.8 lei or 2.45 times (graph 1).

Chart 1. Average monthly salary earnings, 2013-2021, lei



Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Such an increase could appear very significant in developed countries. But for the Republic of Moldova, it is not high enough to really increase the level of well-being of the population.

It should be mentioned that maintaining the low level of wages is a legacy of the socialist economy taken over, practically, by most of the countries in transition to the market economy. However, if in the socialist economy the low salary was compensated by a drastic price policy, and each worker, in addition to this modest income, benefited, free of charge, from a wide range of social services: social protection, medical assistance, children kindergartens, vacation leaves, living space, etc., in the new economic conditions these "benefits" of the socialist economy are no longer actuals. On the other hand, inflationary processes strongly erode the real wages of the population, so that the increases recorded in nominal wages turn into a monetary illusion. Thus, if the wage increases recorded during the years 2014-2021 were, on average, around 10% annually, the increase in real wages was much lower.

The low level of wages, as well as their relative equalization through various capping measures from the socialist period, caused a demotivation of workers' work manifested by the weakening of work discipline, the reluctance of workers to raise their qualifications, which, in turn, led to a decrease in labor productivity in all branches of the national economy. These practices are still observed today, especially in the budget sector.

The low level of salaries in the Republic of Moldova was also determined by the unfavourable economic situation in which the main economic sector, forming the added value within the country's GDP, was considered agriculture, a sector that does not generate a strong increase in labor productivity and, respectively, of salaries. Indeed, until recently the share of those employed in agriculture was around one third (36.1% in 2018). It should be mentioned that

currently, according to the data of the Labor Force Survey, the share of those employed in agriculture was only 22.9% (2nd quarter of 2022)².

Another, rather imposing part of the labor force (26.5% in the 2nd quarter of 2022) is employed in the public sector, where salaries are formed according to the state's limited budgetary possibilities. These are, as a rule, workers in the education sector, health care, culture, etc. - people who have a high qualification who deserve a better reward. Failure to take urgent measures to ameliorate the created situation can have unpredictable consequences, seriously affecting existing human capital, and undermining sustainable human development in the future. Thus, the massive exodus of workers from such fields as education, health care, culture, etc., fields in which the training of specialists requires enormous investments in human capital, can lead to unpredictable consequences for the future of the republic, to its transformation into an underdeveloped country, with no prospects of getting out of this situation.

In these conditions, in order to recover the situation in the field of wages, especially in the budgetary sector, there is an urgent need to rehabilitate the functions of the wage by increasing its size both in absolute value and as a share in the total income of the population, as well as in the Gross Domestic Product.

One of the main tools of the state used in wage policy for a possible wage increase is the minimum wage. By increasing it, the increase in average wages in the economy can also be influenced. It should be mentioned that in the Republic of Moldova, there are two different mechanisms for establishing minimum wages: on the one hand, in the budget sector the minimum wage is equivalent to the reference value from the unitary wage system³, and on the other hand, in the real sector (at enterprises, organizations, institutions with financial autonomy, regardless of the type of ownership and form of legal organization) it is established every year by government decision, following tripartite negotiations between unions, employers and the state, which take into account the annual increase of the index consumer prices and the growth rate of labor productivity. Thus, the minimum wage for the real sector of the economy is established annually in hourly size and monthly equivalent calculated for a full work schedule of an average of 169 hours per month. On April 22, 2022, the value of the monthly minimum wage in the real sector of the economy was set at a level of 3500 lei per month, which represents only 38.97% of the average wage in the economy in 2021 and only 37.4% of the wage environment from the real sector. It is noted that the value of the minimum wage is set at a fairly low level, so that it cannot generate any impetus for significant wage increases for low-income employees and for real wage increases, respectively.

In this situation, the Republic of Moldova is among the countries with the lowest minimum wage in relation to the average in the region and the countries of the European Union. Only in the former republics of the USSR, such as Ukraine (32%) and Armenia (38%), the ratio between the minimum and the average salary can be comparable to the one in the Republic of Moldova⁴.

Despite the increases in recent years, salaries in the Republic of Moldova remain among the lowest in the region. Although salary increases in the last four years have allowed the Republic of Moldova to reach levels comparable to average salaries in Georgia and Armenia and surpassing those in Ukraine (due to the war), the differences with salaries in Western countries have not reduced considerably. The average salary in the Republic of Moldova is still much less than half of the average salary in Romania and only 52% of the average gross salary in Bulgaria (table 2).

² Starting from 2019, certain methodological changes were made regarding the content of some occupational indicators, as well as their calculation from the Labor Force Survey.

³ LAW No. 270 of 23.11.2018 regarding the unitary salary system in the budget sector.

As of May 1, the minimum salary of budget officers was raised to 3,500 lei. People who have a lower salary will receive an additional payment

⁴ Marcel Spatari, Ștefan Guga, The situation of employees in the Republic of Moldova: a structural crisis, Syndex, 2019, p.48, [Syndex - Situatia Salariatilor din Republica Moldova O Criza Structurala 1 .pdf \(fes.de\)](#)

Table 2. Minimum and average gross salary in EU countries and the Republic of Moldova

Country	The monthly minimum wage(Euro)	Hourly minimum wage (Euro)	Year of approval	Average gross monthly salary (\$) in 2021
Belgium	1593,81	9,49 €	1 September 2018	4302,59
Bulgaria	362,58	3,92 Leva	1 January 2022	950
Croatia	623,42	18,90 Croatian kuna	1 January 2022	1505,40
Czech Republic	662,81	90,50 crones	1 January 2022	1752,61
Estonia	654,00	3,86 €	1 January 2022	1912,55
France	1539,42	10,15 €	1 January 2020	4728
Germany	1584,00	9,35 €	1 January 2020	4415,58
Greece	758,33	3,94 €	1 February 2019	1203,03
Hungary	554,65 <small>(720,05 for qualified specialists)</small>	926 <small>(1211 for qualified specialists), HUF</small>	1 January 2022	1512,9
Ireland	1708,33	10,10 €	1 January 2018	3671,17
Latvia	500,00	2,48 €	1 January 2021	1489,89
Lithuania	730,00	4,47 €	1 January 2022	1811,49
Luxemburg	2141,99	12,38 €	1 January 2020	5948,52
Malta	777,1	4,24 €	1 January 2020	1627,19
Netherlands	1653,60	9,54 €	1 January 2020	3313,58
Poland	653,20	19,7 zloty	1 January 2022	1410,33
Portugal	775,83	4,63 €	1 January 2021	1670,40
Romania	515,61	15,239 lei	1 January 2022	1470,62
Slovakia	646,00	3,713 €	1 January 2022	1802,33
Slovenia	1074,43	4,84 €	1 January 2022	2466,42
Spain	1108,00	7,04 €	1 January 2020	2495,62
Republic of Moldova	175, 00 (3500 lei)	1,2 (21,71 lei)	1 April 2022	502,48

Source: [Minimum wage - Wikipedia](#), [Минимальный размер оплаты труда — Википедия \(wikipedia.org\)](#)

Although wages in the Republic of Moldova expressed in euros have increased by an average of 10% in recent years, it cannot be said that this increase in average gross monthly wages was the fastest growing among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In Romania, for example, a member country of the European Union which in recent years was facing an acute shortage of human resources, resorted to significant salary increases, so that the average gross salary in the economy in the period 2014-2018 increased on average by 16%. It must be noted that this practice has given good results, contributing to the increase in the level of employment. (table 3).

Table 3. Gross and net average salary growth expressed in EUR between 2014 and 2018 in Central and Eastern European countries and salary differences compared to the Republic of Moldova

Country	Gross			Net		
	2014	2018	average annual growth 2014-2018	2014	2018	average annual growth 2014-2018
Estonia	1005	1310	7%	799	1098	8%
Slovenia	1540	1682	2%	1005	1093	2%
Czech Republic	936	1243	7%	702	932	7%
Croatia	1042	1139	2%	725	842	4%
Poland	957	1134	4%	679	805	4%
Slovakia	858	1013	4%	651	768	4%
Latvia	765	1004	7%	560	742	7%
Lithuania	677	924	8%	527	720	8%
Hungary	770	1035	8%	504	688	8%
Romania	524	965	16%	382	579	11%
Montenegro	723	766	1%	477	511	2%
Bulgaria	420	580	8%	329	450	8%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	659	697	1%	424	449	1%
Serbia	524	580	3%	380	420	3%
North Macedonia	510	579	3%	347	395	3%
Ukraine	219	276	6%	176	222	6%
Republic of Moldova	225	325	10%	187	264	9%

Source: [Syndex - Situatia Salariatilor din Republica Moldova O Criza Structurala 1 .pdf \(fes.de\)](#)

4. SECTORAL DIFFERENCES IN THE FIELD OF WAGES

Another problem related to the evolution of salaries in the Republic of Moldova is the differentiation of the population according to income according to the field of activity. Indeed, against the background of the increase in the average gross salary in the economy, the polarization of society continues to persist even today. The differentiation of the population according to income is conditioned not only by the diversification of forms of income, but also by the differentiation of salaries in various branches of the republic's economy.

The excessive differentiation of average salaries in various sectors of the economy confirms the fact that the state practically has no power of influence in ensuring the economic efficiency and social equity of the salary policy.

Against the background of the growth of the average gross wage in the economy in recent years, wages in the various economic sectors have not increased uniformly. The evolution of salaries according to the economic sector showed that in the period 2013-2021 the slowest rate of salary growth was recorded in the field of communal services, construction, transport, processing industry, while the highest increases were recorded in health and social work, art and recreation, information and communication, etc.

The essential increase in salaries in health and social assistance was determined by the effects of the reforms carried out in the field of health care. However, it cannot be said that these wage increases also led to a high level of wages compared to other fields of activity.

Low wages cause an acute shortage of personnel, especially in education and health. As a result, the services provided in these areas are not of the best quality. So, the state has not managed for a long time to establish a sufficient budget to increase salaries in the budget sector and stimulate the improvement of public services. It should be mentioned that even now the salary differences between the budgetary and real sectors are quite large. The average salary gain in the budget sector in the 2nd quarter of 2022 was 8712.9 lei, 25.7% lower than in the real sector which was 10960.4 lei.

The increase in salaries in the field of information and communications was determined, first of all, by the increase in demand for services in this field of activity. (table 3).

Table 3. Average monthly wage earnings by economic activities, 2013-2021, lei

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Economic activities - total	3674,2	4089,7	4538,4	4997,8	5587,4	6268,0	7233,7	7943,0	8979,8
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2421,6	2708,9	2994,0	3300,4	3688,4	4188,7	4768,7	5022,9	5691,1
Extractive industry	3816,9	4317,7	4525,1	4428,7	5204,0	5907,7	6455,5	6922,5	7761,9
Processing industry	3600,3	3956,2	4378,8	4804,0	5292,5	5974,1	6593,8	6927,5	7629,7
Production and supply of electricity and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning	6420,6	7249,7	8196,7	8955,5	10189,1	11023,7	12333,1	13153,6	13739,8
Water distribution; sanitation, waste management, decontamination activities	3916,7	4348,6	4686,2	4877,8	5471,1	6256,3	6824,8	7225,3	7779,7
Construction	3822,4	4165,7	4378,1	4843,2	5544,2	6198,2	7155,3	7608,1	8136,5
Wholesale and retail trade; maintenance and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	3005,4	3367,5	3870,6	4246,4	4901,2	5414,9	6543,9	6881,9	7609,9
Transport and storage	3646,0	3939,5	4282,3	4778,6	5313,8	5985,6	6836,2	6533,1	7201,2
Accommodation and catering activities	2460,0	2757,4	3043,7	3331,3	3668,0	4248,5	4973,0	4920,2	5249,9
Information and communications	7387,8	8404,0	9514,0	11041,6	12011,7	13620,3	15785,4	17788,8	22137,7
Financial and insurance activities	7016,3	7505,3	8093,5	10152,2	10743,7	12090,2	13203,5	13619,0	15746,9
Real estate transactions	3137,7	3583,1	4005,2	4595,8	4834,6	5119,8	5906,1	6286,2	7231,1
Professional, scientific and technical activities	4735,7	5568,2	6064,0	6585,6	7117,8	7871,6	8882,5	9698,1	10408,9
Administrative service activities and support service activities	2947,2	3209,5	3553,0	4165,2	4728,6	5002,1	5655,5	6147,5	6733,3
Public administration and defence; compulsory social insurance	4808,2	5243,4	5748,6	6180,3	7372,8	8449,5	9118,6	9985,4	10501,3
Education	3040,0	3391,1	3841,6	4046,0	4478,6	5155,7	6327,6	7016,8	7462,3
Health and social assistance	3610,0	4068,8	4391,2	4972,9	5618,7	6161,5	7024,8	8668,6	11109,1
Art, recreation and leisure activities	2437,5	2710,1	3021,3	3171,2	3365,3	3832,3	5195,6	5724,4	6269,1
Other service activities	4508,0	5279,4	5909,2	6855,9	6287,5	6819,7	8044,5	9601,3	9891,3

Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Currently, the Republic of Moldova is characterized by a cheap labor force due to low wages. At the same time, in the current conditions the relative economic advantage of countries that are characterized by a cheap labor force is reduced to zero, because the cheap labor force is demotivated and, therefore, unproductive, irresponsible, undisciplined, unable to produce quality production. The cheap workforce is rather an index of rejection of direct foreign investments,

which are extremely necessary for the Republic of Moldova, and not a factor for improving the investment climate. Countries with cheap labor usually attract short-term investment projects that cannot have a significant impact on the recovery of the national economy.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the Republic of Moldova is characterized by an extremely low level of wages that generates a crisis of salaried work that is manifested by the increase in the intensity of international labor migration that also leads to the degradation of the situation on the labor market;

Against the background of emigration, the demographic crisis is also deepening (the stable population of the Republic of Moldova is in continuous reduction, and demographic aging);

Some economic sectors face an acute shortage of qualified personnel, and staff turnover and difficulties in hiring employees lead to an increase in work intensity, without this being accompanied by a commensurate increase in employee incomes;

The low level of wages that determines, respectively, a low level of population consumption, which presents an important impediment to the growth of industrial production and aggregate demand.

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