

MIGRATION AND THE RETURN OF MIGRANTS TO THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: PERCEPTIONS OF THE POPULATION AND EXPERTS FROM THE SOUTHERN REGION

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53486/dri2026.77>
UDC: 314.7:332.1(478)

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Abstract: *Mass departures from the Republic of Moldova can no longer be viewed as a passing phenomenon, they have structurally reconfigured the economy, the family, and local communities. This study starts precisely from this reality and seeks to understand how migration is experienced and interpreted by those who remain: the population of the southern region and representatives of local public authorities.*

The research combines two types of data: a survey applied among the population and local experts, conducted within a state project, and semi-structured interviews carried out within the ReMiReM project. This combination was not a formal choice, it was necessary, because numbers alone do not explain why people choose to leave or to stay.

What we found did not surprise us, but it confirmed a real tension: migration is seen, at the same time, as a solution and as a problem. Financial transfers and investments brought by migrants improve family living standards, but behind these gains lie depopulated villages, children raised without parents, and communities that grow thinner with each passing year. As for return, the desire exists, but it rarely translates into a decision. The lack of job opportunities, institutional instability, and the concrete difficulties of reintegration mean that returning home remains, for many, more of a plan than a reality.

Keywords: *return migration, Republic of Moldova, perceptions, socio-economic effects, southern region, mixed methodology.*

JEL: J11, J61, O15.

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova has been living with migration as a daily reality for more than three decades. External departures, initially sporadic after 1991, gradually transformed into a large-scale phenomenon that has profoundly influenced the demographic structure, household economies, and the life of local communities. The external migration of the working-age population, alongside declining birth rates and demographic ageing, has contributed to an accelerated population decline and the depopulation of rural areas. The specialized literature highlights the fact that the Republic of Moldova has been facing a genuine demographic crisis in recent decades, marked by mass emigration, a reduction in the stable population, and the deterioration of demographic structures (Matei, 2013; IOM, 2022).

The effects of this migratory wave are neither simple nor uniform. At the economic level, remittances have sustained domestic consumption and financed construction, education, and small businesses. At the social level, however, the price paid is considerable: fragmented families, rapidly declining rural communities, and local labour markets drained of young and skilled workers. Researchers have long documented this contradiction: migration generates real economic gains, but often pays for them with social losses that no statistic can fully capture (Castles et al., 2014). In the villages of southern Moldova, however, the tension needs no theory to be understood, you feel it in the number of children

in a classroom, in houses renovated with money sent from Italy or Germany, in elderly people left alone, and in the empty yards of otherwise well-kept households.

Faced with this reality, return migration has begun to be viewed differently, not as a failure of the migration project, but as a potential resource. The returning migrant brings not only savings, but also skills, professional experience, and a different perspective on their community of origin (Dustmann & Kirchkamp, 2002). The practical question is whether the conditions exist for this potential to translate into real development, or whether economic and institutional barriers halt it before it has any meaningful impact.

This research is anchored in the southern region of the Republic of Moldova, which includes the districts of Cahul, Cantemir, Căușeni, Cimișlia, Leova, Ștefan-Vodă, Basarabeasca, and Taraclia, located in the southern and south-eastern part of the country, on the border with Ukraine and in proximity to the Danube. The region is characterised by a predominantly agrarian economy, a lower level of infrastructure and service development compared to the central part of the country, and a high intensity of migratory processes. The specialized literature highlights the fact that this region faces persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities, generated by limited employment opportunities, the continued migration of the working-age population, and a high dependence on remittances (Hachi et al., 2026). At the same time, the depopulation process is visible in the demographic structure of rural communities, where population ageing and a deficit of young labour represent structural challenges with a direct impact on economic development and local administrative capacity (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

It is precisely this combination, intense migration, limited institutional resources, and vulnerable communities, that makes the southern region of the Republic of Moldova a relevant setting for understanding the dynamics of return migration. The aim of the research is to analyse the perceptions of the population and local experts regarding migration and the return of migrants, as well as the socio-economic effects of this phenomenon at the regional level. The methodology adopted is mixed, combining the analysis of secondary statistical data with surveys applied among the population and experts, and with interviews conducted in the field. The research pursues three complementary objectives: identifying the economic and social effects of migration on communities in the region; analysing perceptions regarding the opportunities and barriers to the reintegration of returned migrants; and highlighting the factors that influence the decision to return.

Theoretical framework

Return migration is neither a new phenomenon nor a simple one to explain. In the specialized literature, return migration is defined as the return of migrants to their country or community of origin after a period of residence abroad (King, 2000; Cassarino, 2004). But beyond this definition, return is a process of reintegration, economic, social, and identity-based, whose mechanisms have been approached from different theoretical perspectives, each capturing part of the reality without exhausting it entirely.

The oldest explanatory framework remains neoclassical theory, which starts from a simple logic: people migrate to where wages and opportunities are better, and return when the gap has narrowed or when they have reached their initial financial goal (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Borjas, 1989). This is a compelling explanation for the first Moldovan migration wave of the 1990s, when income differences relative to Western European countries were enormous. Its limitations, however, become visible when one tries to explain why many migrants do not return even when their earnings have long surpassed their initial goal, or why others return without having accumulated anything significant.

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) shifts the focus from the individual to the household. Migration is no longer a personal decision, but a collective mechanism through which the household seeks to optimise its economic resources and manage existing socio-economic uncertainties (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Stark, 1991). Within this logic, the migrant's return is planned from the outset, it occurs when the family considers that enough has been accumulated to sustain a

life project back home. This framework explains well the dynamics of many households in southern Moldova, where the decision to leave and the decision to return are negotiated within the family, not made unilaterally.

Human capital theory adds another dimension: the migrant does not leave solely for money, but also to accumulate skills, professional experience, and new perspectives (Sjaastad, 1962; Dustmann & Kirchkamp, 2002). Upon returning home, they can leverage these resources through entrepreneurial initiatives or by accessing better-paid employment. This is the most optimistic theoretical framework regarding the potential of return migration and, at the same time, the one most dependent on the existence of an institutional environment that allows this capital to be genuinely put to use.

Migration network theory completes the picture, showing that no decision to migrate or return is made in a vacuum (Massey et al., 1993). Networks of family, friends, and former migrants transmit information, resources, and practical support, shaping individual perceptions of what it means to leave and what it means to return. In the communities with a strong migration tradition in southern Moldova, these networks are so dense that they have themselves become a decision-making factor, sometimes more powerful than pure economic calculation.

Taken together, these theories do not exclude one another, but rather complement each other. Moldovan migration was triggered by economic factors, structured through the logic of the family household, mediated by social networks, and accompanied by the accumulation of human capital which, under favourable conditions, could contribute to the development of communities of origin (IOM, 2022; Hachi et al., 2021). The question that remains open — and which the present study also attempts to answer — is whether these conditions truly exist in the southern region of the Republic of Moldova.

Research methodology

The phenomenon of return migration cannot be captured through a single type of data. Numbers tell us how many leave, how many return, and at what age, but they do not tell us why, nor what people find at home when they return. For this reason, the design of this research was mixed from the outset, combining quantitative and qualitative components not out of formal obligation, but out of the necessity to capture both the scale of the phenomenon and the lived experience of those involved (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative Component

The quantitative data were collected within the institutional project 01.08.01 "Enhancing Ecological Security and Geo-Ecosystem Resilience to Current Environmental Changes" (2024–2027), through the administration of two distinct questionnaires. The first questionnaire, addressed to the general population and entitled "Assessment of the Current State of Human Potential and Its Role in Ensuring the Resilience and Social Security of the Southern Region," targeted perceptions of migration, its economic and social effects, as well as the migration and return intentions of individuals and households in the region. It was administered to a sample of 262 respondents from 17 localities, representing eight districts: *Cahul* (the villages of Andrușul de Jos, Slobozia Mare, Văleni, and Zărnești), *Cantemir* (the village of Cania and the town of Cantemir), *Căușeni* (the villages of Cărnățeni, Sălcuța, and Zaim), *Cimișlia* (the village of Gura Galbenă), *Leova* (the village of Filipeni), *Ștefan-Vodă* (the localities of Ermoclia, Olănești, and Purcari), *Basarabeasca* (the village of Abaclia), and *Taraclia* (the village of Corten and the town of Taraclia).

From a demographic standpoint, the sample was dominated by the 41–60 age group, which accounted for nearly half of all respondents, 46.12%, reflecting the specific demographic structure of rural areas in southern Moldova, characterised by an advanced process of population ageing. Individuals aged 61 and over constituted a quarter of the sample, 25.97%, confirming the high proportion of elderly population in the localities surveyed. The 26–40 age group was represented at 22.87%, while young people aged between 18 and 25 made up the smallest segment, at just 5.04%, a finding that suggests

a low presence of young people in these communities, possibly as a direct effect of emigration among this age group.

Regarding the gender distribution, women represented the overwhelming majority of the sample, at 72.14%, compared to men, who accounted for 27.86% of all respondents. This asymmetry can be partially explained by the structure of rural households, where men are more frequently abroad, leaving women as the primary presence in the community and, consequently, the most available to participate in the study.

The second questionnaire, addressed to experts from local public administration (mayors, local councillors, public servants) and entitled "Socio-Economic Dimensioning of the Sustainable Development of Urban and Rural Ecosystems in the Southern Region," provided an institutional perspective on the issues analysed. It was administered via the Google Forms platform and recorded the participation of 273 local experts. Both questionnaires were applied during the periods May–September 2025 and March–April 2026, and the data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical methods.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative data were obtained within the project "Investigating the Dynamics of Return Migration in the Republic of Moldova: A Qualitative Analysis" / "Exploring Return Migration Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Romania and the Republic of Moldova" (ReMiReM), through the conduct of 70 semi-structured interviews with returned and potential Moldovan migrants, as well as with institutional representatives. Of these, 60 interviews were carried out with migrants, repatriated individuals, and members of their families, and 10 with representatives of public authorities and field experts (ANOFM, BRD, ministries, NGOs, academia, and the private sector).

Three categories of participants were established: Category 1- Moldovan migrants who have returned to Moldova (face-to-face interviews), with migration experience in: Greece, Italy, Romania, Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, the USA, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Israel, and the Russian Federation. Category 2- Moldovan migrants currently abroad (online interviews), from: Romania, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the USA, Canada, Switzerland, and Austria. Category 3- Institutional key informants: representatives of ANOFM, BRD, NGOs, academia, and the private sector.

The interviews were conducted during the periods August–December 2024 and January–May 2025. From a demographic standpoint, the profile of the interviewed Moldovan migrants living abroad reveals a clear predominance of the 26–40 age group, which accounted for more than half of the participants, 53.33%, confirming that the young working-age population constitutes the main core of Moldovan economic migration. Young people aged between 18 and 25 represented 10% of the sample, while the 41–60 age group was present in a smaller proportion of 6.67%. A distinct segment was formed by minors aged between 11 and 17, 30%. The participation of minors in the study was conducted exclusively in their capacity as members of migrant families, with written parental consent, in accordance with the ethical principles of research. Data collected from this category were used strictly for understanding the impact of migration. In terms of gender distribution, women also predominated in this sub-segment, representing 63.33% of participants compared to 36.67% men, a trend that reflects the progressive feminisation of Moldovan migratory flows in recent decades.

In the case of returned migrants interviewed in Moldova, the demographic profile indicates a major concentration in the 26–40 age group, 57.5%, followed by the 41–60 age group, 40%, suggesting that return to the country is predominantly a phenomenon of individuals at professional and family maturity. Young people aged between 18 and 25 constituted only 2.5% of this sub-segment, which may indicate either a reluctance among young people to return, or a shorter duration of migration experience in this age group. The gender distribution revealed a majority share of women (57.5%) compared to men, 42.5%, a difference less pronounced than in the other sub-segments of the study. The qualitative data were processed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with MaxQDA

software employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and significant narratives from the interview transcripts, complemented by an in-depth secondary analysis through the corroboration of themes with the findings of the documentary research.

The two methodological components were integrated through a data triangulation strategy, in which the quantitative results were deepened and nuanced by the qualitative perspectives obtained from the interviews (Denzin, 1978). This approach allowed for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of return migration, capturing both the structural dimensions and the individual experiences of the participants.

Results and discussions

General Perception of Migration

The first thing the data clearly show is that there is no single perception of migration among the residents and experts of southern Moldova, and it is precisely this diversity of attitudes that says something important about how the phenomenon is experienced differently, depending on the position from which it is viewed.

Among the general population, the majority of respondents, 61.07% refuse to categorise migration simply as good or bad. They simultaneously acknowledge both its positive and negative effects, which suggests a direct and long-standing familiarity with the phenomenon: it is hard to condemn something that paid for the renovation of your house or your child's education, and hard to praise something that took half your family away. Only 16.41% consider it exclusively positive, while 22.52% view it as exclusively negative (Figure 1).

Experts from local public administration see things differently. Almost two thirds of them, 63.74% regard migration as a predominantly negative phenomenon, while only 36.26% consider it positive (Figure 1).

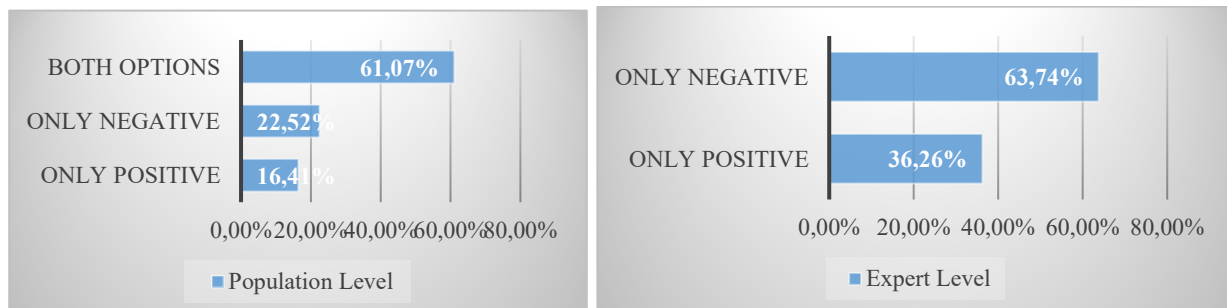


Figure 1. Respondents' Perception of the Migration Phenomenon

Source: elaborated by the author based on data from the sociological survey conducted (population level and expert level)

This difference is not surprising if we consider what a mayor sees every day: classrooms with fewer and fewer pupils, dispensaries without doctors, uncultivated fields, and a local budget that shrinks along with the population. The individual benefits of migration, remittances, human capital accumulated abroad, do not appear in his reports, but the gaps left in the community do (IOM, 2022). This divergence in perception between the population and experts is not specific to Moldova alone. The specialized literature consistently documents the tension between the individual gains and collective costs of migration, underscoring that the same phenomenon can simultaneously be a solution for the household and a problem for the community (Castles et al., 2014; Mosneaga, 2012). What our data add to this picture is that, in southern Moldova, this tension has already been internalised by the majority of the population, the 61.07% who cannot choose between positive and negative are not undecided; they are people who have learned to live with both sides of the same reality.

Economic Effects of Migration

The survey data are clear on one point: when it comes to money, migration works. The vast majority of respondents associate going abroad with increased household income through remittances, home renovation, access to goods that a local salary would not have afforded, and, not least, the accumulation of professional experience that would be difficult to obtain at home. This is not a surprise, it is, after all, the reason people leave.

What deserves attention, however, is that these economic benefits are perceived almost exclusively at the individual and family level, not at the community level. Remittances sustain the household, not the local labour market. They finance consumption and construction, rarely productive investments that would create jobs and reduce the pressure of future emigration, a dynamic well documented in the specialized literature and equally relevant to the Moldovan context (de Haas, 2010).

The in-depth interviews confirm and nuance this picture. The economic factor appears invariably as the main trigger for departure, but also as the main obstacle to return. The wage gap, infrastructure, and quality of services in destination countries create a standard of living that Moldova cannot currently match, turning the intention to return into a perpetually postponed project. One respondent articulates this tension with disarming simplicity: *"The financial part is very important... people want a better life, a more developed country, with greater opportunities."* (Cătălina, 30 years old, Romania, 10 years in migration)

This perspective is not an isolated one, it reflects the logic that Stark (1991) describes within the NELM framework: migration as a strategy for maximising family welfare, sustained for as long as the economic differential between the country of origin and the destination country remains significant. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this differential has not narrowed sufficiently over the past thirty years to reverse the flow, and our data suggest that respondents are aware of this, even if they do not articulate it in economic terms.

Social Effects of Migration

If the economic effects of migration are perceived with ambivalence, the social ones leave no room for interpretation: respondents from both samples, the general population and the experts, describe them almost exclusively in negative terms. The depopulation of localities, the fragmentation of families, children raised without parents, and the accelerated ageing of rural communities together form a social picture that, taken as a whole, calls into question the long-term sustainability of these communities.

The quantitative data confirm this hierarchy of concerns (Table 1). Depopulation is identified as the main social effect of migration by both the general population, 43.90% and local public administration experts, 41.60%. Family fragmentation follows in second place, with 27.60% of population respondents and 20.60% of experts considering it a major effect.

Table 1. Main social effects of migration identified by respondents

Social Effects of Migration	Population/Citizens Level	Expert Level
Depopulation of localities	43,90%	41,60%
Fragmentation of families	27,60%	20,60%
Children left behind	15,40%	13,10%
Ageing of the population	10,90%	24,70%

Source: elaborated by the author based on data from the sociological survey conducted (population level and expert level)

The growing number of children left in the care of relatives is reported by 15.40% of the population and 13.10% of experts, while population ageing is felt more acutely by experts 24.70%, than by the

general population 10.90%, likely because the latter live within the community and gradually normalise it, whereas institutional representatives see it in statistics and in the absence of a workforce. The interviews add what the numbers cannot convey, the emotional dimension of these transformations. Family separation is not an abstract concept for the study participants, but a reality lived for years, sometimes from childhood: *"My father has been away for 7 years, and my mother for 5... we see each other at least once a year."* (Ana, 30 years old, Romania, 2 years in migration)
"From the age of 12 to 17 I did not see my mother... it was the most difficult period of my life." (Alexandra, 33 years old, Italy, 10 years in migration)

These testimonies illustrate a phenomenon systematically documented in research on children left behind in the context of Moldovan migration, emotional and educational vulnerabilities that accumulate silently, far from official statistics (Poalelungi et al., 2016). Separation does not only produce immediate suffering; it redefines intergenerational relationships and shapes the way in which today's children will, in turn, make the decision to leave or to stay. Sometimes, it is precisely this lived suffering that becomes the reason for return, not economic calculation, but the impossibility of accepting a life built at a distance from loved ones:

"It is far too hard. To do everything possible, to be where I wouldn't otherwise be, to be with my children, with my family. I truly cannot see a normal life at a distance." (Sorina, 30 years old, Italy, returned after 3 years in migration)

The interviews also highlight another dimension, less frequently discussed: experiences of discrimination and alienation in destination countries, which complicate the image of migration as a successful project and paradoxically fuel both the desire to return and the feeling of no longer fully belonging anywhere: *"At some point, someone will always show up to remind you that you are an outsider, that you are not from here."* (Crina, 28 years old, Romania, 9 years in migration)

This perception is not an isolated one. It reflects an identity tension that the literature associates with the advanced stages of migration, the moment when the migrant realises they have grown distant from their community of origin, yet have not been fully accepted in the destination community (Castles et al., 2014). In this suspended space, the decision to return sometimes takes on a motivation other than the economic one, not necessarily because home is better, but because it is the place where you know who you are.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data outline a social cost of migration that far exceeds depopulation statistics, it is found in fractured family relationships, in uncertain identities, and in communities that age without knowing how to renew themselves (UNDP Moldova, 2020).

Migration and Return Intentions

The intention to leave remains present in the communities of southern Moldova, and the data leave no doubt as to the reasons. Economic factors dominate, but the picture is more nuanced than a simple search for a higher salary: respondents speak of quality of life, infrastructure, and professional prospects that the country of origin does not yet offer. Migration is no longer perceived as an emergency solution, but as a rational option for a better life, which makes it all the harder to counter through targeted public policies.

When it comes to return, the picture becomes more complex. Asked whether they believe migrants will come back, population respondents are almost evenly split: 41.98% believe they will, 33.21% believe they will not, and 24.81% do not know (Figure 2).

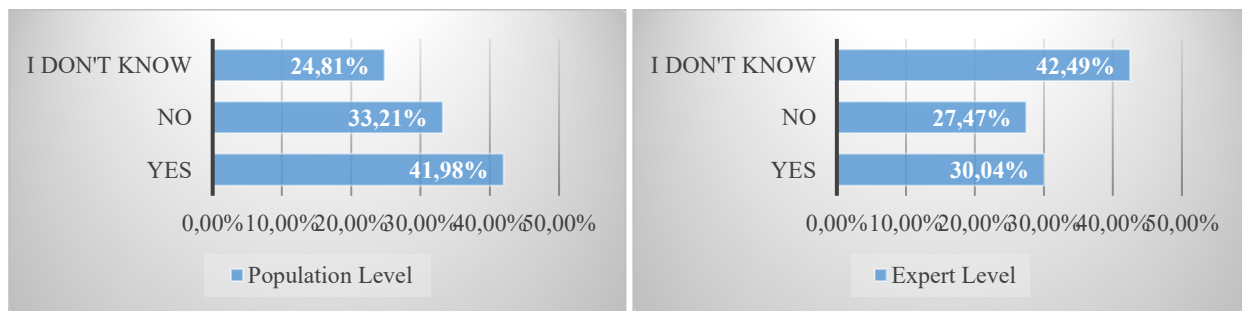


Figure 2. Respondents' Perception Regarding the Return of Migrants

Source: elaborated by the author based on data from the sociological survey conducted (population level and expert level)

Experts are even more cautious: only 30.04% consider return likely, 27.47% rule it out, and 42.49%, the largest share respond that they do not know. This uncertainty is not indifference; it reflects a reality that experts know from practice, return depends on too many simultaneous factors for anyone to predict it with certainty.

The interviews explain the mechanisms behind these figures. The decision to return rarely appears as spontaneous; it is generally planned, negotiated as a couple or within the family, and conditional on the achievement of concrete objectives: *"We, before coming back to the Republic of Moldova, two years before, had planned it... we decided we would stay two more years and then return home."* (Maria, 33 years old, Germany, returned after 5 years of migration)

This logic is perfectly consistent with the NELM framework, return as a planned stage of a migration project with clear objectives (Stark, 1991), and with Cassarino's (2004) typology, which distinguishes between prepared returnees, with mobilised resources, and those forced by circumstances. Maria belongs to the first category, and her testimony suggests that this category exists in southern Moldova as well, even if it is not the majority.

The factors that keep migrants away are, however, stronger than those that bring them back. The financial stability and comfort accumulated over years of work abroad create an inertia that is difficult to overcome: *"Financially, it motivates you to stay there."* (Rita, 35 years old, Austria, 10 years in migration) *"The financial situation, certainly... for improving quality of life, plans that cannot be realised here."* (Austina, 32 years old, Alaska, returned 5 years ago)

Experts add a temporal dimension to this dynamic, the longer the migration lasts, the less likely return becomes. Social and professional integration in the host country is not an automatically reversible process: *"After five years, a situation already arises where the person is practically fully settled and integrated, and their return to the country of origin becomes very unlikely."* (interviewed expert, ReMiReM project)

This observation is also supported by the specialized literature: de Haas and Fokkema (2011) demonstrate that integration into the host society and the building of local social networks significantly reduce the intention to return, regardless of attachment to the country of origin. In other words, it is not that people forget about home, it is that the life built there becomes too concrete to be abandoned.

To this is added a shift in expectations that experts observe from the front line: *"People are now orienting themselves towards a better quality of life there... a more decent standard of living, with more developed infrastructure."* (interviewed expert, ReMiReM project)

The differences in infrastructure and public services between Moldova and destination countries are no longer perceived as temporary, they have become a benchmark against which Moldova is evaluated and found lacking. This explains why return, when it does occur, often has a circular rather than definitive character: *"The circular, pendular kind predominates, you know? They leave, they come back, they leave, they come back."* (interviewed expert, ReMiReM project)

Circular migration is not a failure of retention policies, it is a rational adaptation to a context in which Moldova offers enough for a visit, but not enough for a permanent stay (King, 2000; Hachi et al., 2021). Understanding this logic is essential for any strategy aimed at attracting returnees: it is not enough to make conditions tolerable, they must be made competitive.

Conclusions

Migration from southern Moldova operates according to a well-known logic: it brings money into homes and empties villages. The research data confirm this dual character, real economic benefits at the household level, profound social costs at the community level, and show that local public administration experts, those who manage the consequences on a daily basis, are considerably more critical of the phenomenon than the general population 63.74%, a weighted majority).

The return of migrants is neither spontaneous nor guaranteed. It is planned years in advance, conditional on clear economic objectives, and progressively weakened by integration into the host society. After five years abroad, the probability of permanent return decreases significantly, which explains why circular migration remains the dominant form in the region. Differences in wages and infrastructure are not perceived as temporary, but as a benchmark against which Moldova is systematically evaluated.

Children left behind represent the most invisible and hardest to recover cost of this phenomenon, separations of 5 to 7 years with documented emotional consequences, evidenced in both quantitative data and interview testimonies.

On the basis of these findings, the research formulates five priority directions for action: leveraging remittances through productive investment mechanisms; creating institutional liaison structures with the diaspora to facilitate planned return; sustained investment in rural infrastructure and the local labour market; expansion of social services for migrant families, with a focus on psychological and educational support for children; and the institutionalisation of periodic mixed-method research on the migration phenomenon at the regional level, as a foundation for evidence-based public policies.

Acknowledgements: The research results presented in this article were obtained within Sub-programme 010801 "Enhancing Ecological Security and Geo-Ecosystem Resilience to Current Environmental Changes" (2024–2027).

Acknowledgements: This paper uses data generated within the ReMiReM project — Investigating the Dynamics of Return Migration in the Republic of Moldova: A Qualitative Analysis (PN-IV-P8-8.3-ROMD-2023-0173), funded by UEFISCDI, Romania, carried out by Babeş-Bolyai University (CASTLE Centre) and the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM), 2024–2026.

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