



## Moldovan female migrants in Italy: Expectations of migration vs. migration experiences

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This briefing note compares expectations of Moldovan female migrants before their migration to Italy with their posterior experiences in the destination country, elucidating the fields of interest where expectations least match experiences as well as the consequences of the discrepancies on the migrant and her family members in Moldova. This note further identifies the role of migrant network information in shaping the expectations and feeling of cohesion among Moldovan female migrants across age-groups.

Drawing on literature and qualitative data, this note outlines the following observations:

- Migrant network information is currently the most important source of information for Moldovan migrants in Italy despite reported incongruences and incompleteness of information received by potential migrants from their information sources abroad.
- Future migrants with immediate family members in Italy are convinced that the information they receive is accurate and their migration experience will be successful with the support of their family members.
- Mismatch of expectations and experiences (e.g., income and expenses) results in conflicts within migrant households.
- Younger respondents are not motivated to participate as active members of their migrant network; they prefer to rely on family members and retreat from the diaspora.

These observations, derived from 18 in-depth interviews with Moldovan female migrants to Italy, highlight the importance of cooperation between policymakers and Moldovan migrants. Unverified or erroneous information Moldovans receive from their migrant network increase the risk of landing in an insecure work environment, acquiring insufficient qualifications for intended work prior to migration, and miscalculating the living costs a migrant household has to bear in both Italy and Moldova. Female migration incurs particularly high costs on Moldovan families, additional responsibilities for family members left behind and emotional strain due to long-term separation of dependent family members from their caregivers. Policies tailored to offer safe, affordable and informed solutions for potential Moldovan migrants and their family members left behind, would decrease the risks misinformed migrants expose themselves to in Italy.

### Migration trends among Moldovans

Over the last twenty years, migrant women have emerged as a distinct subject of interest in the field of migration studies. Scholars emphasize the increased pressure placed on women to provide economically for their households. This burden incentivizes women all over the world, including Moldova, to comply with the need for international migration.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in combination with unstable political and economic conditions has prompted Moldovan citizens to seek employment opportunities in wealthier neighboring states, including those in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and European Union (EU). Today Moldova is one of the top emigration countries in the world, with 21.5 per cent of its working age population abroad (CIVIS, 2010).



Moldovan migration has been the focus of research for a number of years, and crucial aspects of this phenomenon have been investigated and documented. Next to other internal drives of Moldovan migration, the expectations 'lens' provides an alternative, non-economic explanation for the decision to migrate, as migrants acquire the ability to manipulate information concerning the country of destination in order for their family to achieve a higher social status in the origin country (Gmelch, 1980; Taylor, Sabates-Wheeler, & Natali, 2010).

Recent studies delimitate the Moldovan migrant population in two broad trends. The first group consists predominantly of relatively poor male migrants who have large families and have resided in rural areas of Moldova for a large part of their lives. The representatives of this group tend to migrate to Russia and other CIS countries, where they engage in predominantly seasonal work in construction and agriculture sectors (Lücke, Mahmoud, & Pinger, 2007). The second group consists of relatively wealthy, urban females with better educational attainment. Their main destinations are Southern European countries that provide employment opportunities in household services, health care, and tourism sectors.

Italy is the second largest destination country for Moldovan migrants after Russia, with 132,000 Moldovan citizens legally residing in its territory (Saran, 2011). Thus Moldovans in Italy represent the largest community of Moldovans in the EU and provide income for a large proportion of households in Moldova. The job prospective that Moldovan citizens have in Italy are relatively stable, particularly given the large proportion of Italy's population aged 65 and over, which was 20.3 per cent in 2007. In the context of social care arrangements, it means that over 12 million elderly Italians may be in need of specific healthcare services (Degiuli, 2007).

### Challenges of Moldovan female migration

Given the limited use of the internet or options to visit the EU, many Moldovans have a biased impression of employment and income in the EU (CIVIS, 2010). Migrant relatives and acquaintances readily share successful migration narratives, which inclines many Moldovans to believe that migration offers a solution for their financial struggles.

According to a 2009 study conducted by the European Training Foundation (ETF), 92.6 per cent of Moldovans expect migration to improve their financial situation. In contrast, only 55 per cent of return migrants indicated an improvement of their financial situation upon return. A common employment feature across migrant groups is engagement with small, private employers, often in the informal sector of economy. In these conditions, Moldovan migrants are frequently forced to make concessions regarding working conditions, reward, and legal protection (Kring, 2007).

Back in Moldova, female migration challenges the traditional roles of women as domestic workers and caregivers. Individuals and the society at large continue to expect migrant women to perform traditional roles as caregivers, placing excessive burdens on female migrants who must perform these duties from a distance and while working in fulltime employment. Research and social media emphasize negative developments for household members left behind, including stress, fear of abandonment, and abusive behavior on behalf of temporary caregivers, which breed an unhealthy environment for young Moldovans and their ageing migrant parents alike (Keough, 2006).



## Study Objectives

Limited, expensive legal options to migrate to the EU and high expectations of migrant household members underline the importance of accurate communication about living and working conditions abroad. In combination with heavy dependence on migrant networks for assistance and information, migrants are exposed to potential human rights violations (De Haas, 2010). This note reports on the role that migrant networks play in shaping knowledge and expectations about the migration experience as compared to alternative sources of information. Knowledge on a range of issues that Moldovan migrants encounter during their migration are explored. These issues include: job search, integration in Italian society, evolution of relations with family and friends in Moldova, and information shared with fellow citizens upon return. Assessment of the expectations of these different issues provides information regarding where expectations are least in line with realized experiences, which can in turn provide migrants and their household members with information for a successful, sustainable, and safe migration experience.

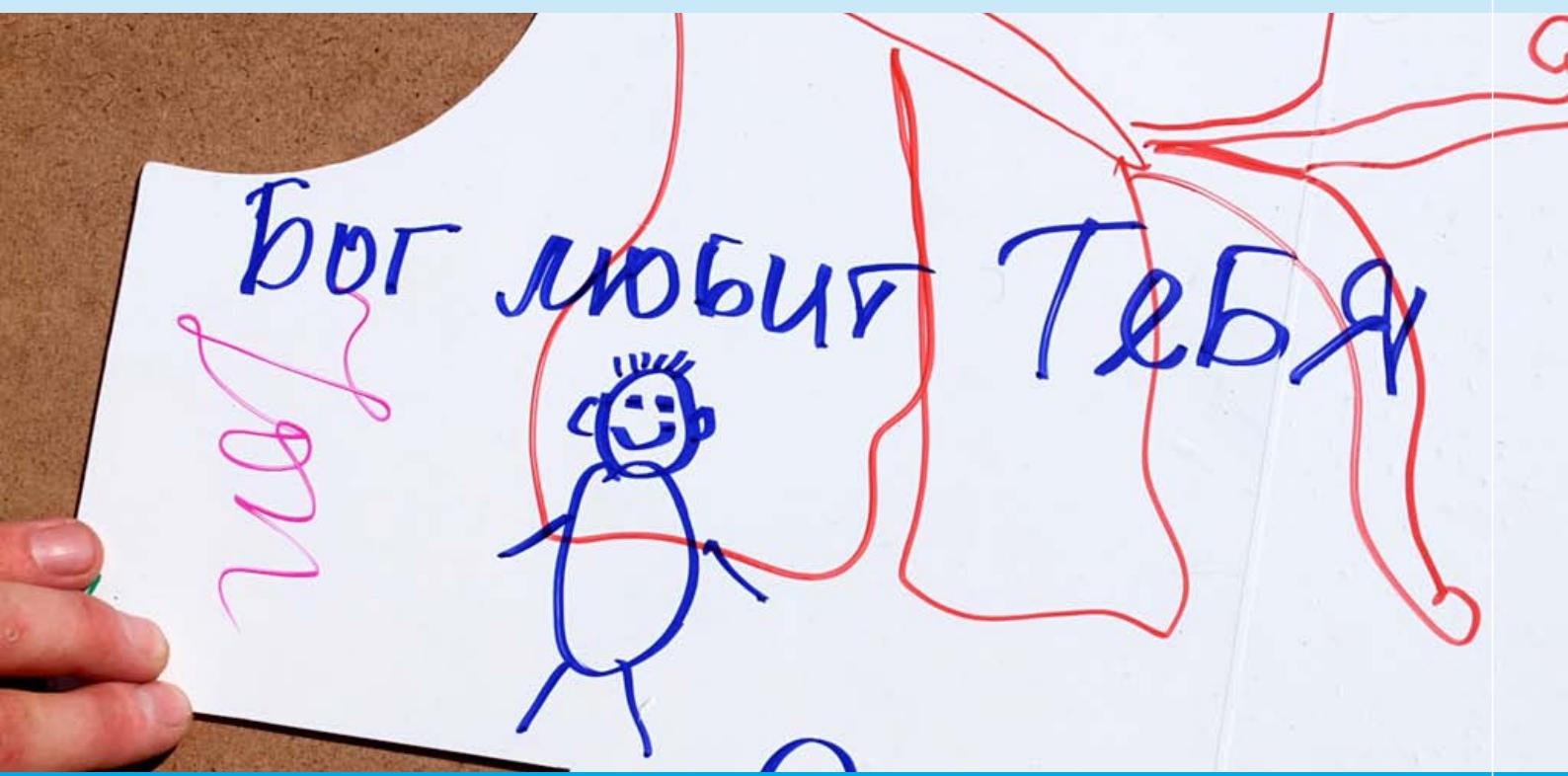
The Moldovan community in Italy is an important economic, social, and cultural partner for policymakers (Saran, 2011). This note reports on the prospective of cohesion among members of the Moldovan female migrant network, areas of internal conflicts, and the extent to which the network is attractive to join for individual migrants. An open multi-stakeholder dialogue on the reliability of information sources accessible to

Moldovan women across the country and consequent realistic assessments of their expectations provide young Moldovans with the necessary tools for an informed choice on migration. The results this paper presents are intended to guide researchers and policy-makers in identifying areas of migrants' decision-making most susceptible to erroneous estimation.

## Findings: Alignment/misalignment between expectations and experiences

Expectations of Moldovan migrants are in line with, or close to, experiences concerning *job options in Italy*. Future migrants are usually well informed on job opportunities in the social care and domestic work sector as well as the intense schedule and obligations such jobs require. Similarly, migrants are informed on the *possibility of abuse or sexual harassment* and the job positions in which this is more likely to occur. Further research and training of potential migrants on existing cultural differences, language skills, and the legal system will help future Moldovan migrants anticipate the attitude they may be subjected to as domestic care migrant workers and help them defend their legal rights should abuse or exploitation arise.

In addition, respondents' expectations match experiences concerning the *role of the migrant network* as a reliable 'social protection net' that provides assistance in all stages of migration, from shelter and employment options in Italy to moral support during the course of daily life.



## Income vs. Expenses

In several important areas, and across generations, expectations of Moldovan migrants differ substantially from realized experiences. Respondents report that they tend to underestimate monthly expenses in both Italy and Moldova, and consequently, the period of migration necessary to reach the initial financial goal. Respondents speak of disappointment in excessive expenses in the country of origin by recipients of remittances, particularly for purposes other than those initially agreed upon.

## Family relations

The estimated negative consequences of migration on family relations are typically overestimated. Current and return Moldovan migrants generally expect migration to deteriorate their relations with children, elderly dependents, and partners. Future migrants expected distance relationships with their partner to be tense and difficult to maintain.

Similarly, participants speak of a stereotypical perception in Moldovan society that migrant mothers are selfish and irresponsible. These images, however, are frequently misconceptions. It is common that other members of the family persuade the mother to migrate. Respondents recall that their partners offered significant support during their migration and were more involved in the household and in the education of their children during their absence.

Younger respondents with migrant parents do not expect migration to affect their own families in a negative manner, as periodic absence of family members comes naturally to them. As large-scale Moldovan female migration is expected to continue in the coming decade (Saran, 2011), migration may become an acceptable, natural choice for an entire generation of young Moldovans.

## Labor conditions

Expectations concerning long-term effects of work in the social care and domestic work sector on health of Moldovan women are usually limited. Migrants repeatedly mention the negative impacts of confined space employment, special needs of the care beneficiaries, and irregular schedules. Future migrants, in contrast, frequently fail to acknowledge the impact of domestic work employment on their own physical and mental health.

Most of the members of the migrant network are employed in the domestic work sector, yet future migrants frequently

expect to have employment options in other sectors, although they have limited knowledge of the job options, requirements (e.g. fluency in Italian language, qualifications), and employment conditions in other sectors. This combination potentially results in illegal employment in the desired sectors and abusive economic behavior by employers.

The combination of high expectations and limited abilities for the desired job could also increase the pressure on migrant network members, as they are expected to provide assistance with employment in sectors with which they have no, or limited, familiarity. As a result, unrealistic expectations could damage the internal cohesion of the migrant network.

## Communication with locals

Lastly, expectations of migrants differ on the extent of communication with Italian employers and acquaintances. Due to differences in interests and behavior, respondents expect little contact with locals outside working time. Contrary to expectations, migrants feel treated in a fair manner, and they report that their honesty and correctitude is appreciated by Italian employers.



### Results: Migrant network as infallible source of information

Migrant network information is a connecting thread throughout all interviews. The migrant network can be identified as the most important source of information and support for Moldovan women in all investigated areas of interest, particularly concerning job options, schedule and income for jobs in social care and domestic work sector. The contribution of the network in educating future migrants and helping those stranded in Italy is not to be underestimated.

There are many dangers, however, in the perception that the migrant network is the only timely and reliable information source for Moldovan women in Italy. For instance, migrants may make migration decisions based on biased, subjective, or downright erroneous information, with no particular institution or individual to be held accountable for misinformation. Among possible causes for erroneous information respondents enumerate: shame (e.g., abuse on behalf of employers undisclosed to potential migrants); envy (e.g., migrants who migrated in the early 2000 envy the ease with which Moldovans in possession of Romanian citizenship migrate to Italy) and peer pressure. Further, migrants dependent on network information and support may face pressure to provide services to influential members of the network in return for received help (Keough, 2006). Additionally, the Moldovan migrant network in Italy is a relatively new development. The support migrants provide for each other is based on subjective, volatile criteria and inconveniences created by interaction of Moldovans within the network endanger the cohesion and future developments of a strong diaspora. The study results indicate that current migrants feel less motivated to communicate with an

extended network of Moldovans in Italy as they become weary of offering services such as housing and job provision (Cvajner, 2011) to their co-nationals. Such developments hold negative consequences for small location-based networks, which constitute an important source of migrant support. They also undermine the future development of a large, organized Moldovan community in Italy.

It is important to further investigate how information and service provision affect internal cohesion within the Moldovan migrant network. Young respondents mentioned the decreasing importance of the migrant network in the lives of migrants with immediate family members in Italy. Calumny and unfair job competitions are among the reasons for limited communication with other Moldovans, which could suggest that migrant networks are becoming more exclusive.

### Conclusions: Implications for policymaking

The above-mentioned findings on the 'disconnect' between expectations and realities are an important step in the dialogue with migrant women, confirming that their expectations, despite support from kin-based migration networks, may differ from the objective reality in Italy. If future migrants acknowledge the divergence between their expectations and experiences and display a desire to inform themselves better prior to migration, it could be a positive development for Moldovan migration management. Policy instruments could be tailored to the particular areas of interest where expectations are least in line with experiences and provide support for future migrants and their household members.



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