

## SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF MOLDOVAN MIGRANT'S CHILDREN IN ITALY

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## ABSTRACT

The article explores the features of the Moldovan migrant's children integration in Italy and the dynamics and particularities of the second-generation formation. The study is based on statistical data analysis on the Moldovan communities of immigrants in Italy and the integration of migrant children into educational institutions. The risk factors of social adaptation of children of Moldovan migrants based on the sociological quantitative and qualitative research conducted in 2015-2019 are analyzed. The study results show that the children of Moldovan migrants face difficulties integrating into Italian society, even though they have more opportunities than their parents. There are specific differences in children's integration depending on the age of arrival in Italy, the success in learning the Italian language, the type of family (full or single parent, mixed family), and the intensity of social contacts. Children of migrants born in Italy do not experience significant difficulties in social integration, primarily thanks to their knowledge of the Italian language. Children from mixed families where one of the parents is an Italian citizen also do not have a problem. The most significant difficulties are encountered by young people who arrived in Italy as teenagers and have lived in Moldova for a long time with other relatives since their parents moved to Italy for work. The need to reunite with the family after 5-10 years of separation from parents, sometimes with a new mixt family, creates additional psychological and socio-cultural barriers in the process of integrating children in Italy.

**Keywords:** *international migration, educational integration, children of immigrants, Moldovan migrants, second generations*

Articolul evidențiază particularitățile de integrare a copiilor migranților moldoveni în Italia, dinamica și specificul formării celei de-a doua generații. Studiul se bazează pe analiza datelor statistice privind comunitățile de imigranți originari din Republica Moldova și integrarea copiilor migranților în instituțiile de învățământ, precum și pe rezultatele cercetărilor sociologice cantitative și calitative realizate în anii 2015-2019. Într-o manieră complexă sunt analizați factorii de risc ai adaptării sociale a copiilor migranților moldoveni. Rezultatele studiului arată că aceștia se confruntă cu o serie de dificultăți în integrarea în societatea italiană, în ciuda faptului că au mai multe oportunități decât părinții lor. Există unele diferențe în procesul de integrare a copiilor care depind de vârsta de sosire în străinătate, succesul în însușirea limbii italiene, tipul de familie (completă, monoparentală sau mixtă), precum și intensitatea contactelor sociale. Copiii migranților născuți în Italia nu întâmpină dificultăți semnificative în integrarea socială, datorită cunoașterii limbii italiene. De mai multe beneficii se bucură și copiii născuți în familiile mixte în care unul dintre părinți este cetățean italian. Cele mai mari dificultăți le-au întâmpinat copiii care au ajuns în Italia la vârstă de adolescență și care au locuit o perioadă îndelungată în Moldova alături de alte rude atunci când părinții lor au plecat în străinătate în căutarea unui loc de muncă. Necesitatea de a se reuni cu familia după 5-10 ani de separare cu părinții, uneori cu o familie nouă mixtă, creează bariere psihologice și socioculturale suplimentare în procesul de integrare a copiilor în Italia.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *migrația internațională, integrare educațională, copiii imigranților, migranți moldoveni, generații secunde*

В статье освещаются особенности интеграции детей молдавских мигрантов в Италии, динамика и специфика формирования второго поколения. Исследование основано на анализе статистических данных о сообществах молдавских иммигрантов в Италии, интеграции детей-мигрантов в образовательные учреждения, а также результатах количественных и качественных социологических исследований, проведенных в 2015-2019 гг. Анализируются факторы риска социальной адаптации детей молдавских мигрантов. Результаты исследования показывают, что дети молдавских мигрантов сталкиваются с целым рядом трудностей при интеграции в итальянское общество, несмотря на то, что они имеют больше таких возможностей, чем их родители. Существуют определенные различия в интеграции детей в зависимости от возраста прибытия в Италию, успешности в освоении итальянского языка, типа семьи (полная или неполная, смешанная семья), а также интенсивности социальных контактов. Дети мигрантов, родившиеся в Италии, не испытывают каких-либо значимых трудностей в процессе социальной интеграции, в первую очередь, благодаря знанию итальянского языка. Дети из смешанных семей, где один из родителей является гражданином Италии, также имеют больше преимуществ. С наибольшими трудностями сталкиваются молодые люди, прибывшие в Италию в подростковом возрасте, и которые длительное время проживали в Молдове с другими родственниками, с тех пор как их родители выехали в поиске работы. Необходимость воссоединения с семьей после 5-10 лет разлуки с родителями, иногда с новой смешанной семьей, создает дополнительные психологические и социокультурные барьеры в процессе интеграции детей в Италии.

**Ключевые слова:** *международная миграция, образовательная интеграция, дети иммигрантов, молдавские мигранты, второе поколение*

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, about a quarter of Moldova's population have left their homeland in search of work and a better life ([Gagauz et. al. 2021](#)). For many of them, short-term labor migration has turned into immigration with permanent residence in the host country. Currently, the largest communities of Moldovan emigrants are located in Italy – over 122 thousand Moldovan legal residents ([ISTAT 2021](#)). In the last few years the number of those who acquired Italian citizenship practically outnumbered those who emigrated to Italy from Moldova. In 2014, there were about 150 thousand Moldovan legal residents. According to the official data, about 30 thousand Moldovan migrants had obtained Italian citizenship until 2022 ([MLSP 2022](#)). Currently, an increase in the number of naturalization cases is expected because many Moldovan migrants have been living in Italy for more than 10 years. The share of young Moldovan migrants went up by almost 20%. They acquired Italian citizenship through transmission by submitting applications when they turned 18 years old.

Since 2010 the number of Moldovan children in Italian kindergartens and schools has been exceeding 20 thousand every year and has currently reached about 26 thousand ([MIUR 2022](#)). In addition, about 2500 Moldovan students are registered at universities. Most of them finished schools in Italy and then opted for further studies ([MLSP 2022](#)). The considerable number of Moldovan children born in Italy is relevant for the formation of the second generations. However, these children do not obtain Italian citizenship at birth

(according to the IUS SOLI principle). They can only submit an application when they reach the age of 18. The last data show that about 20 thousand children of Moldovan citizens have been born in Italy ([MLSP 2022](#)).

The integration process is considered to be an important stage in the adaptation of migrants and their children in the host country. Nowadays Italy witnesses the formation of a second generation of Moldovan immigrants. The second generations are actually post-migration generations (came out of migration processes), they are descendants of parents who emigrated. These new generations represent a bridge between the country of origin – Moldova – and the country of residence – Italy, between the migrant parents and the host country society. Unlike their parents, children of immigrants choose to self-identify differently and it matters if they had migration experiences. This fact also influences their intentions regarding the future. A series of factors related to the emigration causes, such as the family background and the specifics of the host country, affect the intentions of young migrants and the integration success.

What actually happens to Moldovan children when they arrive abroad? What difficulties do they face, who helps them? What is the specificity of their educational and social integration? To what extent do the following factors matter: the age at which they emigrated, the family situation, the migration network, the knowledge of Italian? How do they self-identify and what are their future intentions? This study aims to answer these questions.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

The immigrants' children in the host countries have attracted the researchers' and authorities' attention from the perspective of attested vulnerabilities. At the same time, child integration is considered a stage in the transformation process from temporary to long-term or even permanent migration. These aspects have been frequently studied in the last two decades ([Bolzman et. al. 2017](#), [Ricucci 2022](#)).

The process of social and educational integration of migrant children is extremely important, and is a key factor for a successful management of this phenomenon ([Giovinazzi & Cocchi 2022](#), [Santagati & Colussi 2021](#), [Mucomel 2013](#), [Poalelungi 2012](#)). Their well-being depends on the successful integration into schools. This fact applies not only to children of immigrants,

who had migration experiences, but also to those born in the host country ([Ambrosetti et. al. 2022](#), [Gabielli & Impicciatore 2022](#)). The failure to integrate into school leads to the re-emigration or return of the children to the country of origin. Such cases are quite numerous among migrants ([Triventi et al. 2022](#)). It is attested that there are different trends and educational and training pathways in different integration contexts – countries, regions, cities. These aspects must be subject to a thorough analysis ([Colombo & Rebughini 2012](#), [Crul 2012](#), [Bertozi 2016](#)).

Good language knowledge can predict the success of immigrant children's educational integration. This variable predominates during the first adaptation period. ([Cavicchiolo et al.](#)

2020). The academic success increases the motivation for integration as well as the level of self-esteem (Di Bartolomeo et. al. 2017). Immigrants' children actually represent the keystone of the family's migration project. Usually they have very high expectations. Several studies highlight the gap between the level of expectations and the real chances that the children of immigrants have (Feliciano & Lanuza 2016). In reality they still have difficulties in keeping up with the natives, either because of poor knowledge of the language or because traditionally the immigrant communities have a moderate level of schooling (Engzell 2019). The particularities of integration depend on the family's migration background and the involvement of women into this process (Marchetti & Venturini 2014).

There are several risk factors that can affect the success of migrant children's social adaptation process. Lack of equal opportunities, underperformance, prejudice and discrimination, antisocial attitude affect the children of immigrants, especially during adolescence (Bohman et. al. 2019, Di Bartolomeo 2017, Feliciano & Lanuza 2017). Some gender related aspects have also been mentioned among risk factors for the successful integration of young immigrants (Bozzetti 2019, Mantovani et al. 2018, ISTAT 2020). The advantages offered young immigrants by access to citizenship remain important in terms of overcoming the difficulties (Artero & Ambrosini 2022). The significant role of the host country local and central authorities in the efficient and responsible application of the integration

policies has been emphasized. (Collyer et. al. 2020). A high level of integration of migrants and their children is reflected by their participation in society in general, with special reference to the institutional level: labour market, financial-banking sector, health and educational systems.

Some specific new social effects were noted in reference to emigration from Moldova. The development of the „culture of migration”, along with other push factors, influence the emigration intentions, especially in young people (Tabac & Gagauz 2020). Depending on the context of integration, the social memory retains the migration experiences as „fingerprints”. This leads to a specific attitude and behavior. It has been established that there is a connection between social memory, social capital, self-identification and belonging to a certain society, culture, history, etc. (Bozhkov & Ignatova 2020).

The literature review highlighted the existence of multiple factors that influence the integration of immigrants' children. During the long period of emigration to Italy (about 30 years) large communities of Moldovan migrants have been emerging, including post-migration generations – second generations. Therefore, it is very important to study the educational integration and future migration orientations. The purpose of the research is to determine the particularities of the Moldovan migrant children's integration process into educational institutions in Italy (kindergartens, schools, universities); to analyze the formation features of second generations.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The study is based on official data of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (MLSP), Ministry of Education (MIUR) etc. The data regarding the presence of Moldovan citizens in Italy, the enrolment of Moldovan students in educational institutions have been analysed along with case

study data and focus group discussions. In addition, quantitative and qualitative studies carried out in 2015–2019 have been used. The questionnaire-based survey included 100 young Moldovan migrants in Italy, 18–23 years old. Their socio-demographic profile is presented in (Table 1).

**Table 1:**

*Socio-demographic profile of young Moldovan migrants in Italy included in Survey*

Total		%
Age (years)	18–20	58,0
	21–23	42,0
Sex	Male	43,0
	Female	57,0

Total		%
Level of education	Secondary education	36,0
	Special secondary studies	25,0
	Tertiary education	39,0
Age at mother/father's emigration to Italy	1–5 years old	17,0
	6–10 years old	51,0
	More than 10 years	32,0
Length of stay in Italy	2–3 years	29,0
	4–9 years	48,0
	More than 10 years	23,0

The study data were corroborated with the data of the 31 questionnaires filled in by migrant parents. The selection of respondents was done according to the snowball method. Most migrant parents are from the Italian regions of Lazio, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Tuscany. Many of them have been living in Italy for 10–15 years and more.

Additionally, 25 in-depth interviews with young Moldovan migrants, 20 – with Moldovan

teenagers born in Italy and 50 in-depth interviews with experts have been carried out. The last category included representatives of Italian and Moldovan institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Migration and Asylum Bureau, Diaspora Relations Bureau, IDOS Centre, social services, high schools), academic environment, migration experts, cultural mediators, judges, pedagogues, psychologists, journalists, missionary priests, etc.

## MAIN RESULTS

The empiric data show that many Moldovan children perceived the migration as a radical change, namely the integration into a new school, society in another country. In most cases the first months abroad did not pass without tears, without the need to rebel. The young respondents mentioned being registered in the new schools according to their age or in

lower grades with 1–3 years younger children. They talked about the benefits of gradual integration or the immediate consequences of integration forced by circumstances. The stories of these children differ from case to case. The children often had the feeling that they have not justified their parents' expectations:

*„When I came to Italy it was very difficult. I didn't know the language, I had to make new friends. The school was new. I had new teachers”...*

*„You feel disconnected from your own origins, from culture, from the habit of always hearing the mother tongue; it's hard to identify with a certain culture”.*

The (long) period of being away from the mother or both parents who had been working abroad, had several repercussions on the children, including on their integration in the host country. Where the decision to emigrate was

made hastily, the difficulty increased even more. The emigration experience found the children totally unprepared: morally, psychologically, linguistically, etc.

*„The children who came from Moldova in the first decade of the 21st century have a trauma from the period in which they lived in Moldova, in many cases alone – with neighbors, grandparents, brothers, sisters, relatives (without parents). They went to school in Moldova. Reuniting with the family, coming to Italy, those children integrated into the school in Italy very quickly and easily. But at the same time there is also a very big difference, because it is clear that they are psychologically stressed children – they have certain psychological problems, especially in the mother-child relationship. They suffered a trauma when they were small being left at home – it is very difficult to marginalize it”.*

In the interview the cultural mediator said:

One of the experts interviewed who supported the integration of Moldovan children in

kindergartens and schools in Italy attracted attention to the emotional impact that entering a new school has on the migrant child's life:

*„The migrant child enters the school door and knows no one. The teacher must understand that he doesn't talk to him not because he doesn't know the subject or doesn't want to, he actually knows, but at some moments he can't answer immediately. The child feels responsible in front of his parents – because he wants to prove them that he is brave”.*

The children who followed their parents abroad at the age of 10–12, mentioned that the adaptation period was long and difficult. Many

of them, being students with good academic success in Moldova, experienced communication difficulties of at school in the first months:

*„It was quite complicated for me and my sister. She had to pass the secondary school exams, and I – the exam at the end of high school studies, but we both didn't know anything in Italian”.*

For some young Moldovans migration was a true test of maturity; early maturity that made them very responsible. The respondents say that studying abroad facilitates the integration

process, especially for children of Moldovan migrants. They overcome the difficulties after a certain period of time:

*„This experience mobilized me and after a year I was already one of the best students at school, and this revealed the characteristics that we have – perseverance and tenacity”.*

The parents confirm the problems the young migrants had in the first months of stay in Italy: learning Italian, the integration/adaptation in a new school, a new country. Only 4 parents said that their children had not encountered any problems as the integration was gradual.

The young migrants who participated in the research were aware of the importance of

learning Italian in order to integrate into the society. First of all, they mention the need to learn Italian to integrate in kindergartens or schools, as well as to interact with children and adults. Most of those who have been in Italy for more than 10 years said they had very good knowledge of Italian. The situation is different for those who have been in Italy for up to 3 years (Table 2).

**Table 2:**

*Knowledge of the Italian language related to period of stay abroad, %*

		Very good	Good	Sufficient
Period of stay abroad	Up to 3 years	10,0	62,0	28,0
	3–9 years	70,0	28,0	2,0
	10 years and more	87,0	13,0	0
	TOTAL	56,6	34,3	9,1

Source: based on the Survey data



Maintaining Romanian as a language of communication in migrant families and within the migrant network (with friends, relatives, their children) contributes to self-identification, to the postponement of acculturation, which happens in the following generations. Most of the children and teenagers who immigrated to Italy at the age of 10–17 continue to consider

Romanian as their mother tongue. Those who went to Italy for family reunification up to the age of 10 or even younger mainly speak Italian despite the parents' insistence. During the discussions they admitted they did not speak correctly because they had not spoken Romanian for a long time (Table 3).

**Table 3:**

*The language spoken in a family related to the period of stay abroad, %*

		Romanian and Italian	Mostly Romanian	Mostly Italian	Only Italian	Other languages
Period of stay abroad	Up to 3 years	31,0	69,0	0	0	0
	3–9 years	66,7	20,8	4,2	6,3	2,1
	10 years and more	65,2	4,3	26,1	4,3	0
	TOTAL	56,0	31,0	8,0	4,0	1,0

Source: based on the Survey data

The young Moldovans who emigrated to Italy and their parents point out that the emphasis on learning Italian was specially made in the first years of emigration. It was aimed to help children learn the Italian language more quickly and support them in their school integration process. Communication in Romanian and interaction with the Romanian-speaking people was limited to family members, migrant or parish communities, phone conversations with relatives or friends in the home country, short visits to Moldova, etc. Later these limitations are gone thanks to access to the Internet and social networks, etc.

The language spoken with friends reveals the extent of young people's tendency to integrate into Italian society. On the other hand, they make an attempt to preserve the knowledge of their mother tongue. However, it depends on the period of stay abroad and on the entourage. The situations are very different in the cases of mixed families; the presence of relatives and friends; in cases of larger compatriot communities; maintaining relations with the country of origin, etc. There have been noticed aspects connected with acculturation: the longer the duration of stay abroad the less is the communication with representatives of one's own community. It diminishes drastically or even disappears (Table 4).

**Table 4:**

*Preferred language in communication with friends related to the period of stay abroad, %*

		Romanian and Italian	Mostly Romanian	Mostly Italian	Only Italian
Period of stay abroad	Up to 3 years	35,7	60,7	0	3,6
	3–9 years	45,7	26,1	17,4	10,9
	10 years and more	30,4	4,3	43,5	26,1
	TOTAL	39,2	30,9	18,6	12,4

Source: based on the Survey data

The place of birth indicates the difference between children of immigrants and migrant children. If a child is born in Italy, he speaks perfect Italian – he may have other problems in the process of social integration, but not linguistic. Children who come for family

reunification must overcome first of all the problem of learning Italian, in addition to various other discriminations. In both cases, they are attached labels like „son of the immigrant”. They are viewed with distrust, sometimes almost with hostility.

*„Children and young people from the second generations already have a double identity: one from their origin and the Italian one. They are raised in Italy and feel Italian. Basically, they started their education in Italy and are perfectly integrated. Those born in Italy take a different route, a different path. Those who came from Moldova are a bit adrift – in any case, it's a different language, a different reality for them” – expert, cultural mediator.*

*„The life of an emigrant represents the crossing of borders. Often this fact is trivialized and hidden under the burden of racism or enormous daily difficulties. The progress we must make is to come to consider immigrants as a resource” – representative of the IDOS Centre.*

Most of the respondents mentioned that at home they speak Romanian and Italian or predominantly Romanian. Only 7 parents from mixed marriages indicated Italian as the language of communication. The migrant parents said that they spoke Italian very well. Migrant parents who have children born in Italy mentioned that they had no problems with adaptation / integration into society because they consider Italian as a native language. These children may have a different attitude to the Romanian language, even in relation to their older brothers and sisters. Children born in Italy perceive Romanian as their „parent's native

language”. Even if they consider Romanian as their mother tongue, the language of the country of residence predominates in the children's lives.

In mixed families children often understand Romanian, but cannot overcome the language barrier to speak, because Italian is a predominant language of communication in their families. For some of them a motivation to learn Romanian was visiting their grandparents in Moldova on vacations. The migrant parents say their children born abroad learn Romanian, but speak with an accent or with difficulty.

*„We noted several cases in which Moldovan children avoid or even categorically refuse to speak Romanian or say that they miss the country where they were born. I don't think that the main reason would be that they integrated perfectly into Italian society and forgot their mother tongue. Many times, the period when their parents went abroad leaving them in someone else's care was a traumatic experience and the children try to marginalize this trauma” – female, Moldovan migrant association.*

Children whose at least one parent is a Moldovan citizen show good indicators of school and social integration in Italy, though there were some difficulties. The integration process of Moldovan children born in Italy or arrived in Italy at a young age (under 6 years old) was natural, without difficulties, because they started the cycle of integration in educational institutions from the very beginning. The difficulties increased for the 6–10 years old children who had started their education in Moldova and had been without any parental care for some period of time.

Moldovan teenagers who accompanied their parents to Italy at the age of 12–14 and more were the ones who encountered the most serious problems. It influenced the period of adolescence, the fact of being far from friends, grandparents, relatives, and the school/locality where they had grown up. Some of them who emigrated to small towns in southern Italy suffered more because of the disbalance between expectations and the reality they had to face. The integration process was easier in large Italian cities. As young Moldovan migrants

mentioned, big cities offer more opportunities to study, more perspectives, and chances to find a job. Some young people confessed that they had gone through complicated periods in which they risked dropping out of school.

Many of the respondents who emigrated at least 10 years before, said that they had encountered various discriminatory situations (especially those who emigrated in the early 2000s). Those who have lived in Italy for up to 3 years experienced fewer situations of this kind. In particular, immigrant children felt discriminated against in society, in mass media, as well as at schools, public administration institutions, etc.

After several years of stay in Italy, over 50% of young Moldovans applied for Italian citizenship. Several respondents, being aware that they do not fulfill the conditions provided by the Italian authorities for the acquisition of citizenship, mentioned that they would apply when they or their parents would have 10 years of legal residence.



## CONCLUSIONS

The study carried out with young Moldovan migrants in Italy revealed the particularities of the integration process in Italy. A series of difficulties encountered by the children of Moldovan migrants at the first stage of settling in the host country, including episodes of discrimination and increased vulnerability in the case of single-parent families, have been determined.

The Moldovan teenagers had to learn the Italian language very quickly in order to be able to study the school subjects, to get promoted to the next grade at the end of the academic year and take the exams provided by the school program.

Several variables influenced the integration process: the place of birth, the emigration age, the presence of both parents, other siblings, etc. The risk factors are the emigration in adolescence age with its vulnerabilities; the fact of leaving friends in Moldova when adolescents at the age of 15 already have their group with common interests. In their case the cultural and psychological shock was very strong, especially

because they had to re-integrate into the family (sometimes in a new, mixed family) after a period of 6–9 years.

The registration in 1–3 years lower grades, not according to their age, increased the feeling of non-integration and a desire to re-emigrate to have better life prospects. The Moldovan children, who emigrated to Italy with their families before 2010–2014, had more integration difficulties.

Many Moldovan teenagers say they had to work to support their families while studying in high school or university. They are convinced that they did the right thing by making efforts to integrate because the studies in Italy offered them a lot of opportunities.

For what concerns Moldovan children born in Italy, they pursued a natural path of integration into society, without specific difficulties. They partially speak Romanian, though Italian prevails. Romanian is spoken in the families and the children are aware that it is also their mother tongue.

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