

A TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGE MECHANISM AMONG MOLDOVAN MIGRANTS IN THE PARISIAN REGION: EXPLORING THE “POST OFFICE OF MOLDOVA”

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SUMMARY

This article delves into the phenomenon of material goods circulation in the context of international migration, specifically looking at the exchange of parcels between Moldovan immigrants in the Paris region, France, and their kin, friends, and acquaintances in Moldova. The analysis uses field data collected during an ethnographic study conducted in 2017 within the Moldovan immigrant community in Paris. It moves beyond the limitations of push-pull theories that focus solely on one-way material circulation from immigrants to their home country families or only on the economic implications of remittances.

Adopting a diverse methodological and epistemological stance, the author's inductive approach highlights the heuristic value of the field data. This data suggests that the parcel exchange between Moldovan immigrants and their compatriots carries significant social and symbolic meaning for all actors involved in this process. Over time, this exchange has evolved into a social institution, creating an ongoing link between the host country and the country of origin. The author scrutinizes the material and symbolic processes involved in the parcel transfer mechanism, whimsically referred to by the migrants as "Post Office of Moldova", the name of the national postal service in Moldova. The article explores both the commercial and non-commercial dynamics that shape this mechanism's operations and its integrative impact on the Moldovan immigrant community in the Paris region. The motivations that drive these material flows associated with migration are portrayed in terms of reciprocity, redistribution, and altruism, thereby emphasizing the reciprocal nature of these exchanges.

Keywords: *material circulation, migration, reciprocity, social exchange, parcels, transnational networks, Moldova*

Articolul de față analizează fenomenul circulației materiale asociate migrației internaționale, prin prisma schimbului de colete între imigranții moldoveni din regiunea pariziană, Franța, și rudele, prietenii și cunoștințele lor din Moldova. Mobilizând date de teren colectate în cadrul unui studiu etnografic efectuat în 2017 în rândul comunității de imigranți moldoveni din regiunea pariziană, articolul de față depășește teoriile de tip push-pull, ce se focalizează exclusiv pe circulația materială unilaterală, dinspre emigranți spre familiile lor din țara de origine, sau doar pe valoarea economică a remitențelor.

Pornind de pe poziții metodologice și epistemologice diferite, demersul autoarei este unul inductiv, ea punând accentul pe virtuțile euristice ale datelor de teren. Acestea sugerează că schimbul de colete dintre emigranți și apropiații lor din Moldova au o valoare socială și simbolică importantă pentru toți actorii ce participă la acest schimb. De-a lungul timpului, schimbul de colete ia forma unei instituții sociale, care face legătura între țara-gazdă și cea de origine în mod continuu. Autoarea examinează procesele materiale și simbolice implicate în mecanismul de transfer al coletelor, denumit de către migranți, cu o doză de ironie, „Poșta Moldovei” – numele companiei naționale de servicii poștale din Moldova. În articol, este analizată dinamica comercială și non-comercială care încadrează funcționarea acestui mecanism, precum și impactul său coeziv asupra comunității de imigranți moldoveni din regiunea pariziană. Motivațiile ce alimentează fluxurile materiale asociate migrației sunt descrise în termeni de reciprocitate, de redistribuție și de altruism, accentuându-se caracterul bilateral al acestor schimburi.

Cuvinte cheie: *circulație materială, migrație, reciprocitate, schimb social, colete, rețele transnaționale, Moldova*

В статье представлены результаты исследования феномена обращения материальных товаров в контексте международной миграции, конкретно рассматривая обмен посылками между молдавскими иммигрантами в регионе Парижа, Франция, и их родственниками, друзьями и знакомыми в Молдове. Анализ основывается на данных, собранных в ходе этнографического исследования, проведенного в 2017 году в сообществе молдавских иммигрантов в Париже. Исследование выходит за рамки ограничений теорий push-pull, которые фокусируются исключительно на однонаправленном обращении материальных товаров от иммигрантов к их семьям на родине или только на экономических последствиях денежных переводов.

Принимая разнообразную методологическую и эпистемологическую позицию, индуктивный подход автора подчеркивает эвристическую ценность этнографических данных. Это предполагает, что обмен посылками между молдавскими иммигрантами и их соотечественниками имеет значительное социальное и символическое значение для всех участников этого процесса. Со временем этот обмен превратился в социальную институцию, создавая постоянную связь между страной принимающей и страной происхождения. Автор внимательно изучает материальные и символические процессы,

связанные с механизмом передачи посылок, который мигранты с юмором называют «Почта Молдовы», название национальной почтовой службы в Молдове. Статья исследует как коммерческую, так и некоммерческую динамику, которые определяют функционирование этого механизма, а также его интегративное воздействие на сообщество молдавских иммигрантов в регионе Парижа. Мотивации, которые стимулируют эти материальные потоки, связанные с миграцией, представлены в терминах взаимности, перераспределения и альтруизма, тем самым подчеркивая взаимный характер этих обменов.

Ключевые слова: материальная циркуляция, миграция, взаимность, социальный обмен, посылки, транснациональные сети, Молдова

INTRODUCTION

Moldova has witnessed a significant increase in migratory trends over the past three decades, indicating its escalating global integration. Nevertheless, the post-socialist reforms undertaken in the country have resulted in pervasive impoverishment, casting doubts on the legitimacy of the nascent state (Rosca, 2019). By 1999, over 70% of Moldovans were living in poverty, the GDP had plummeted to a mere 35% of its 1990 value, and the population was on the decline—a trend that persists today. According to a survey conducted in 2000 (IPP, 2000), 82% of respondents believed the country was turning in the wrong direction, 78% held trust solely in the Orthodox Church, and 55% expressed an aspiration to emigrate either temporarily or permanently. Between 2000 and 2005, approximately one-fifth of Moldovans sought employment opportunities overseas, culminating in a substantial influx of remittances that comprised 35% of the country's GDP level in 2006 (Luecke et al., 2007, p. 17). Official data suggest that around 10% of the population emigrated in the early 2000s—a figure that potentially doubles when considering undocumented emigrants. By 2007, estimates placed the number of Moldovan emigrants at about 700,000 (World Bank, 2011, p. 55). By 2023, nearly one in three of Moldova's stable population of 3.5 million were living abroad for the majority of the year. Migration processes persist, and the population continues to reduce (Tabac, 2021; Gagauz, 2023). As per Tabac (2021, p. 111), the population decline from 2014 to 2019 is estimated at around 7.9%. While Moldova's net emigration rates—calculated as the difference between the number of individuals entering and those leaving a country within a specific year, standardized per 1,000 inhabitants—fell to 14th place globally in 2018 (CIA, 2018), remittances continued to contribute significantly, constituting over 15% of the GDP value in 2021, with a recorded inflow of 2.17 billion US dollars in 2022 (World Bank Data, n.d.).

In parallel with Moldovan emigration, practices of social and economic exchange have developed, facilitating mutual support and individual solidarity at various levels. These practices include informal transnational crowdfunding platforms to aid migrants, peer-to-peer lending among migrant families, or parcel exchanges (Caracentev, 2020; Caracentev, 2022). Speaking about

parcel exchanges, some quantitative data available, stemming from 2012 by NEXUS (Zwager & Șințov 2014), hints at the sheer size of this phenomenon. According to these statistics, the average number of parcels sent daily to Moldova by migrants was estimated at 1,200. The monetary value of the contents of these parcels was projected to be around 43 million euros, approximately 5% of the monetary transfers from these migrants to their families. Hence, one can deduce that the average monetary value of one parcel sent by Moldovan migrants to their families was approximately 100 euros.

Such practices of material circulation have played a pivotal role in maintaining connections across borders. However, despite extensive research on these practices within broader European and transatlantic contexts, a scarcity of studies examining their implications in Moldova persists. Existing analyses often oversimplify the issue of material circulation, concentrating solely on unidirectional flows towards Moldova and utilizing rudimentary cost/benefit calculations. These calculations, rooted in neoclassical economic theory, are commonly used in migration studies to evaluate migration's positive (benefits) and negative (costs) effects on a specific country. As pointed out by Abdelmalek Sayad, the definitions of “cost” and “benefit” (where Sayad uses “profit” instead of “benefit”) are subjective (Sayad 1986, p. 79). This argument refers to numerous studies on Moldova conducted by international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the International Agency for Source Country Information (IASCI). These studies typically focus on material circulation from emigrants to Moldova, often guided by *push-pull* theoretical constructs to shape public policy in Moldova. Despite their concentration on the inflow of monetary resources and goods due to migration and their inherent limitations, these studies still provide valuable statistical data on Moldovan migration. However, empirical evidence suggests a more intricate reality, where material circulation is multidirectional, connecting migrants both within and across countries, as well as with non-migrants in Moldova. The dynamics of this material circulation are deeply intertwined with moral, social, geographical, and transnational considerations.

In response to the identified research gap, this analysis is based on an empirical, qualitative study conducted with Moldovan immigrants in the Paris region between July and October 2017. The methodology incorporated ethnographic observation and biographical interviews – mainly focusing on the migratory episode – to broaden the analytical perspective and generate innovative hypotheses and concepts. This methodological framework included 18 in-depth interviews, with participants selected based on their involvement in the Moldovan immigrant community. The selection principles were designed to capture a diverse range of experiences, including various activities such as church gatherings, informal meetings, and collection drives for goods intended for Moldova. The research also involved participant observation at various collection points for migrant parcels. Observations and interviews

were conducted during the specified period, and the data thus gathered were processed and analyzed to provide the empirical foundation for the study. All data were collected and handled with the utmost care for ethical considerations, anonymity, and privacy of the participants.

This analysis focuses on the bilateral flow of exchanges between migrants and their relatives or friends in Moldova. It begins by reviewing the literature on material and non-material circulations in migration studies (1), and then by presenting the data and methods used for this study (2). Lastly, the main results are presented in section three (3). This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of material circulation and its implications in the Moldovan migration context.

LITERATURE REVIEW. MATERIAL AND NON-MATERIAL TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATIONS LINKED TO INTERNATIONAL MIGRATIONS

The economic understanding of migration, specifically the push-pull models, has shaped the study of Moldovan migration (Cheianu-Andrei, 2013; Stöhr, 2013). This perspective focuses largely on the unilateral movement of individuals from poorer to wealthier nations and the circulation of money, goods, and services associated with migration (Tabac & Gagauz 2020). However, this model fails to explain why migration does not originate from all impoverished areas and why it is concentrated in certain affluent nations only (Portes & Böröcz, 1989; Massey et al., 1993, p. 428).

Moreover, the traditional economic understanding of migration (see for instance, Vaculovschi 2023) has overlooked certain nuances of the phenomenon, such as the parcel exchange process and the reciprocal exchange between migrants and non-migrants. The practice of sending goods, often packed in parcels from migrants to their families and friends back home, and the reverse flow of local products and symbolic items, from home to migrants, forms an important part of the migrant experience. This bilateral exchange, constituting both tangible and intangible cultural elements, plays a crucial role in maintaining familial and communal ties and helps migrants stay connected with their cultural roots (Caracentev, 2020).

Despite its significance, research on parcel exchange in the context of Moldovan migration remains scarce. Similarly, the dynamics of bilateral exchange, which could offer deeper insights into the complexities of the migrant experience, have not been adequately explored in Moldovan academic discourse. The lack of focus on these aspects in Moldovan studies highlights the

need for more comprehensive and nuanced research approaches to better understand the multifaceted nature of migration. It underscores the need to move beyond the economic-centric approach and incorporate socio-cultural elements in the study of migratory processes.

Instead of adopting the conventional push-pull theories, some scholars suggest a more holistic approach that encompasses transnationalism (Schiller et al., 1995). This perspective sees the migrant as an active participant influencing both the host and origin societies. Portes et al. (1991), Tarrius (2002), Potot (2003), El Miri (2011), Pathirage & Collyer (2011), and Caracentev (2020; 2022) for the Moldovan case, all reflect this approach, effectively making migration phenomena epistemically objective (Sayad, 2014).

Alejandro Portes' works offer a unique perspective by introducing the concept of "globalization from below" which looks at the adaptations and innovations initiated by transnational communities in areas like entrepreneurship and transnational communication (Portes, 1999). These communities, created in the wake of the capitalist dynamic, often establish dense, geographically widespread networks to counter the uncertainty inherent in the migrant condition. Alejandro Portes' (1999) thesis on transnational communities posits: (i) their emergence and evolution are tied to capitalist dynamics; (ii) they diverge from traditional communities in structure and operation; (iii) they have greater internal growth potential than standard communities, owing to their ability to leverage resources and opportunities across national contexts, leading to synergistic growth effects.

Peraldi (2016) proposes a distinction between migratory logic and commercial routes. He introduces the idea of migratory commerce, a concept referring to an organization by various groups of migrants engaged in trade. He suggests a variety of mobilities, including tourist, migratory, and commercial activities, thereby portraying migration as part of a range of transnational mobilities.

Diminescu (2008) contributes to this discourse by arguing that 21st-century migrants are characterized by mobility and connectivity. This shift, facilitated by ICTs, gives rise to a “culture of surveillance.” She challenges Sayad’s notion of “double absence” (Sayad, 1999) by introducing the concept of “double presence”, which emphasizes the importance of communication in the evolution of migrant practices.

Weber (2013) offers the concept of “regional cohesion of connections woven from below”. He identifies cosmopolitanism as a form of transnationalism that functions as a class discriminator and argues that circulatory spaces and transnational communities are filled with multiple stratifications and social distances.

Lastly, Tarrius’ (2002) mobility paradigm emphasizes the circulatory dimension of migration, advocating that migration is not a simple, unidirectional movement, but a complex, often cyclical pattern of human mobility.

The literature on migration offers various perspectives that redefine our understanding of the subject. Despite its dominant influence among Moldovan scholars, the push-pull model leaves several questions unanswered. Conversely, the transnational perspective, with its emphasis on the social structures and networks that shape migration, offers a more comprehensive understanding. Nevertheless, migration is a complex phenomenon, and no single theory can adequately encompass all its aspects. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to this field by examining the issue of material circulation within Moldovan migration,

focusing on its economic, social, and cultural implications, echoing Annette Weiner’s (1992) insightful analysis illustrating the capacity of objects to foster social relationships. This article will employ a multi-dimensional approach to this topic, moving beyond the limitations of the unidirectional logic of push-pull theories, and addressing the often-overlooked bilateral aspects of material circulation. Drawing on my field research conducted in Île-de-France in 2017, it is evident that material circulation, far from being unilateral, is integral to the lives of these migrants and their relationships with their families and friends back in Moldova. Thus, in this analysis, I will focus primarily on the bilateral dimension, even though my field data suggest that the material circuits might be more intricate. For instance, one of my respondents collected goods for children of Romanian ethnicity in Ukraine. Another respondent prepared a parcel of clothes and shoes, which were “in good condition and that [she] no longer wears,” along with some French delicacies she sent to her sister residing in Dublin, Ireland.

By aligning with the transnational perspective, this paper aims to build upon the foundational work of scholars such as Portes (1999), Benarrosh-Orsoni (2016), Weber (2013) and Peraldi (2016). It will consider the transnational dimension outlined by all these works.

This research thereby reinforces the importance of recognizing economic phenomena as socially embedded realities deeply intertwined with complex social transnational structures. Here, individual economic activities are not isolated but reliant upon social elements such as trust, altruism, and the density and centrality of social groups. It further emphasizes the role of migrants as active transnational social actors, affirming their ability to influence and reshape both host and home societies.

In doing so, this paper hopes to provide a more nuanced understanding of the multi-faceted nature of Moldovan migration, specifically the bilateral material and non-material circulations.

DATA AND METHODS

THE FIELDWORK DATA: COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND EXAMPLES

Data collection primarily utilized two techniques: i) narrative interviewing and ii) ethnographic observation. The narrative interviews enabled each participant to recount their experiences and perceptions of social and economic exchanges, with a particular focus on the practice of parcel exchanges. This technique proves particularly useful in understanding cultural and social phenomena from an individual perspective. Conversely, ethnographic observation offered a more in-depth understanding of the exchange practices, the emotions

involved, and the social dynamics at play. In this context, I apply a broad and general definition to the term “exchange”. This denotes the act of transmitting and reciprocating in return for goods, services, and various acts of politeness. The dynamics of such exchanges are not invariably concurrent or commensurate within an economic context. This clarification is critical to avoid any potential misconceptions concerning Polanyi’s conceptualization of “exchange”, which refers to a specific institutional arrangement.

Analysis of the collected data primarily consisted of thematic analysis, which facilitated a deeper exploration of the phenomenon. To provide a more nuanced understanding, I compared the experiences and perspectives from different interviews.

All fieldwork data collection was guided by ethical considerations inherent in such research methods. Consent was obtained from each respondent after

ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, how the information would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Privacy and confidentiality were ensured by anonymizing all identifying information.

Below, I present a few examples from my fieldwork data that served as the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

I met Daniela¹ (29 years old, bachelor's in economics, accountant / cleaning lady) for an interview at Place de la Nation, in Paris. She has been in France since 2015. Her husband, aided by a few friends, arrived a few months before Daniela. At the time of their departure from Moldova, the couple's child was 3 years old. He stayed in Moldova with his maternal grandparents, and it was only a year and a half later, in 2016, that he joined his parents in France. If Daniela made an appointment with me at Place de la Nation, it's because she had "things to do in that area"; she had come to send some money – "not much, 75 euros" – to her retired parents, as well as a parcel containing laundry detergent – "here [in France], it is of better quality" –, a few cans of tuna, sweets "for the children of [her] sister", some coffee, "because in Moldova it is too expensive", and other "small things that cannot be found in Moldova".

On Sundays, after mass at the Orthodox church in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, the parishioners share offerings. It's a good opportunity to socialize, exchange information about work, about bureaucratic procedures in the French administration, or even to make friendships. Usually, women walk around with trays of food (homemade cakes, buns, biscuits, savoury and sweet pies) among the parishioners and serve them. It often happened to me to hear them say proudly: "Try this cake/dish. I just received it from home [i.e., from Moldova]".

Another day, I was invited to lunch at a Moldovan friend's house, a manager in a Parisian company. The dish – a roasted rabbit – is presented as a delight, as the meat comes from Moldova. My friend's parents raise animals in Moldova for their own consumption and, from time to time – "in winter, because in summer it's too risky because of the heat" – they send their daughter "a bag", meaning a parcel with food and other items from Moldova. Her mother-in-law, also Moldovan, lives in Italy. So, my friend and her husband systematically receive parmesan, olives, and wine from Italy.

Indeed, these anecdotes are abundant. Moldovan immigrants in France, irrespective of their legal status, and their employment conditions—be they contract-less domestic workers, company executives, or students—all understand what it means to "send or receive a bag." In

Romanian, "trimit / primesc geantă", literally means "I send / I receive a bag", that is, a parcel. This custom has become so commonplace that I didn't encounter any migrants during my field research who had never partaken in sending or receiving a parcel.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PARCEL EXCHANGES

Historically, the practice of "sending and receiving a bag" within Moldovan migration took root between 2000 and 2005. In this period, nearly 20% of the population emigrated from the country. Throughout these years, many Moldovans reached countries within the European Union through illegal means, often resorting to human trafficking networks, as evidenced by Veronica's husband's case (Veronica, 36 years old, high school education, unemployed / housekeeper) who spent 2,000 euros to reach his destination in 2005, navigating through German forests and hiding

in large trucks. Quantitative data on this unauthorized emigration are absent. Nevertheless, in an informational report for the World Bank, Moldovan statisticians surmised that around one-third of Moldovan emigrants had illicitly traversed the border in 2010 (CIVIS, 2010, p.15). Considering that numerous Moldovans already possessed Romanian passports in 2010, it can be conjectured that the fraction of those who illicitly crossed the European Union border prior to 2007—when Romania introduced provisions for the naturalization of Moldovans—was likely more substantial.

¹ Fictitious first name. In order to respect the anonymity of my interviewees, I have changed their first names. However, I have chosen first names that respect the gender of the person (for example, a female name if the interviewee is a woman). In parentheses, after the first name, the following is indicated in the order announced: the person's age at the time of the interview, i.e., in 2017; the level of education; the profession practiced in Moldova / the job held in France.

Upon arrival, these individuals became undocumented immigrants, lacking the legal right to reside in the host country and work in the formal labour market. Being “undocumented” significantly restricted their rights, including the ability to open a bank account. Concurrently, access to certain postal services and lawful money transfer networks often demanded identity documents that the migrants couldn’t provide. Lastly, the exorbitant transfer fees forced migrants to explore alternative ways to “send bags” back to their home country. Regarding the transaction fees levied by Western Union, for instance, during the 2000s, one can refer to an article published in the *New York Times* on November 22, 2007. Specifically in France, for certain destinations, these charges surpassed 10% of the total remitted amount.

In this context, informal networks for the transport of money and goods were established, linking migrants with Moldova. This pathway for material circulation has evolved into a truly international circulatory space, that has its own operational logic and moral code. Minibuses and coaches operate on a weekly basis, shuttling between Moldova and France continuously. Their primary function is to deliver parcels dispatched by families of Moldovan migrants and, in , to collect the

parcels and monetary remittances that these migrants transmit to their families in their home country.

The scale of this material and symbolic exchange system is substantial, as evidenced by the sheer number of parcels sent and received. Luecke and Stoehr (2012, p.7) estimate that, in 2012, a Moldovan migrant’s monetary transfers to Moldova averaged 27,000 MDL (about 1740 euros). This figure was complemented by more than 30,000 MDL (over 1,935 euros) in non-monetary transfers (i.e., parcels). These numbers underscore the significance of the parcel transfer phenomenon (at least from migrants to their country of origin). However, these statistics do not address the parcel circulation in the opposite direction—those sent from families remaining in Moldova to the migrants. As the testimonials obtained from my fieldwork suggest, the number and monetary value of these parcels would also be substantial, correlating with the quantity and monetary worth of parcels sent by the migrants. The empirical information gathered from my field study predominantly comprises qualitative data, rendering it inappropriate for confirming the stated hypothesis within this context. A comprehensive quantitative investigation would increase precision in validating the hypothesis.

MAIN RESULTS

A BRIDGE LINKING MIGRANTS AND THEIR RELATIVES FROM THEIR HOME COUNTRY

The parcel exchange has therefore become a universal practice, and metaphorically it resembles a *bridge*—a notion that emerges from the analysis of the practice of material circulation in Moldovan migration—that links continuously the emigrants with their close relatives back in Moldova. The metaphorical bridge serves as a vital connection between emigrants and their close relatives in Moldova. It symbolizes the continuous flow of objects, ideas, and emotions in both directions, akin to vehicles transporting tangible and intangible value. Parcels act as tangible expressions of love, care, and support, bridging the geographical distance and fostering a sense of connection and belonging.

The bridge operates as a multifaceted system of exchange. On the material level, it facilitates the transport of

various goods and products that hold personal and cultural significance. For example, migrants may send essential items such as food, clothing, or household supplies that are difficult to obtain or of better quality in France. Additionally, they may include sentimental items or gifts that serve as reminders of home and shared experiences. The collection points – which are also present in the Parisian and Moldovan geographical spaces – serve to maintain group boundaries among these Moldovan migrants. In Ile-de-France, several collection points have been identified near the *Château de Vincennes*, at the *Porte de Montreuil*, at the *Place de la Nation*, at the *Place Trocadéro*, as well as in certain localities in the *Val-de-Marne* department, notably in *Villeneuve-Saint-Georges* and *Valenton*, where a significant number of Moldovans live.

THE TWO PILLARS: THE COMMERCIAL LOGIC AND RECIPROCITY

The circulatory space of material exchange within Moldovan migration operates on the foundation of two distinct pillars: **commercial logic** and the **logic of reciprocity**. These pillars shape the dynamics and functioning of the bridge connecting migrants to their country of origin.

Commercial logic is driven by principles of economic exchange and mirrors the practices of market systems. Within this logic, goods and parcels are exchanged based on their economic value, availability, and demand. Transporters are those who engage in exchanges on a commercial basis. They are fixing

a price per transferred kilogram and are selling Moldovan products—like chocolates, sunflower seeds, or pickled fish—in clandestine shops improvised on the back side of their buses. This commercial aspect of the bridge emphasizes an important part of the economic significance of material circulation on the “bridge”.

However, alongside the commercial logic, the bridge also operates on the principle of reciprocity. I adopt Polanyi's conception of reciprocity. According to Polanyi (2011), the principal forms of integration—institutionalized patterns of interdependencies among the movements of goods, services, and people (Polanyi 2011, p.77) - encompass reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange. Reciprocity is a variant of economic integration undergirded by a symmetric structure, redistribution is underscored by a centralized structure, and exchange is dictated by a market-based structure. As per Polanyi's assertion, the most genuine system of reciprocity is the ‘kula’, as described by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, p. 80). Reciprocity entails mutual exchange and the fulfilment of obligations between migrants and their families. It goes beyond economic considerations and encompasses the exchange of emotions, signs of solidarity, and acts of mutual assistance. Through reciprocity, the bridge becomes a venue for the exchange of intra-community services, where migrants support their families in Moldova while receiving emotional support in return. This reciprocal dimension strengthens collective identity and fosters a sense of community among migrants and their families.

The bridge's internal organizational logic and communication means contribute to its flexibility and adaptability. The actors involved, such as transporters and migrants, navigate the ever-changing context and

circumvent formal rules and regulations that may hinder the flow of parcels. They maintain a delicate balance between competition, driven by market dynamics, and solidarity, which safeguards against external threats and challenges. A transporter who agreed to speak with me—transporters typically regard the researcher as a potential “external threat” capable of infringing upon their domain—mentioned that every transporter is aware that “they are all in the same boat and that they can all sink together [in case of a collision with national authorities]” (Sergiu, 48 years old, transporter/driver). Therefore, they send messages to each other, they signal to communicate and indicate the presence or absence of a “threat”, which can arise as much from the national authorities of the countries through which the parcels transit, as from the organizations practicing thuggery or racketeering (incidents of this nature were common during the 1990s, but they have become increasingly rare in recent times, nevertheless, still mentioned in the discourse of my interviewees). Transporters, recognizing their shared vulnerabilities, establish communication networks to exchange information and signal potential risks that may arise from national authorities or criminal organizations.

Interestingly, Moldovans have ironically referred to this fluid and mutable space as the “Post Office of Moldova.” This term encapsulates the transformative nature of the bridge, which has evolved into an international platform for material circulation. Through the exchange of goods and money, the bridge upholds economic morals and strengthens the ties between migrants and non-migrants in Moldova. It serves as a custodian of economic relationships, fostering interconnectedness and sustaining the flow of resources in the two directions.

OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES, ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS, AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF TANGIBLE EXCHANGE BETWEEN MIGRANTS AND THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The practice of sending and receiving parcels among Moldovan immigrants residing in France (and elsewhere) has become a structural component in their lives and those of their immediate kin in Moldova. The significance of these practices is measured less by the financial value of the parcels and more by their *social and emotional worth*, as suggested by the field data. While it is true that an economic (and to a certain extent, commercial) rationale partially undergirds the circulation of parcels—this observation is particularly applicable to nuclear families, within which a rudimentary incarnation of the resource redistribution principle can be discerned (Rosca 2018, p. 382) —, the predominant driving force behind this phenomenon emanates from a culture of *reciprocity*. This culture

seems to be gaining ubiquity within Moldovan society and its migrants, and it prescribes the norms of interindividual interactions.

Therefore, individual behaviours and governing principles transcend the utilitarian framework, challenging the mainstream microeconomic theory that assumes individuals always act to maximize their utility. This phenomenon, therefore, invites comparisons with social exchange theory, which emphasizes the importance of reciprocal exchange in maintaining social relationships. This study may also contribute to broader debates about the social implications of economic activities and the economic dimensions of social relations.

We [the interviewee and her husband] send both money and parcels, but more often money. We help them [their parents]. We also help my brother. He is a student in Romania and my parents do not have the means [i.e., they don't have money] to assist him. We give them what we can. Sometimes 50 euros, sometimes 100 euros. Sometimes less, sometimes more. In fact, in a short while, my husband must go to the bus to send some money and a few basic goods. At the same time, he must collect a parcel that my mother sent us. [...] Of course, I don't ask her for anything. They, too, never ask for anything. But I prepare everything—a bag, a bit of money—without telling them a word, and once I hand it over to the driver, I call them to tell them to go pick it all up. My mother says, 'You shouldn't have! Why did you bother? We are managing here.' I know it's not true, that when she goes to the market to buy food, she can't even afford a piece of cheese. [...] What does she send me? Fruits, vegetables, wine. The other day, I burst into tears, so moved when she told me she had put some stems of spring onions in the parcel. [She displays a sad smile.] I always tell her not to send us anything, but she insists on doing it at all costs. She sends what she has, but always makes sure to send something. For Christmas, she prepared a parcel for us with pork meat, sauerkraut, and buckwheat." (Veronica, 36 years old, secondary school education, unemployed / domestic worker).

This extract from my dialogue with Veronica serves as an emblematic illustration of the views expressed by my interviewees. From a sociological perspective, it suggests that the exchange of parcels encapsulates the inherent logic governing social interactions within both the nuclear and extended Moldovan family structure. By extension, this legitimizes the postulation that such exchanges also reflect the inherent logic pervading the two distinct societal groups in Moldova: migrants and non-migrants.

The compulsive practice of reciprocating gestures underscores the importance of at least two principles integral to the social dynamic. Firstly, within familial relationships, parents inadvertently perpetuate their financial responsibilities towards their children into adulthood. A similar underlying logic, albeit in a nuanced manner, is also observed in relationships within a sibling group, wherein a portion of the parental responsibilities can be delegated to the eldest sibling. Veronica's case serves as a compelling illustration of this phenomenon, and numerous comparable instances can be found. This transference of the parental role onto the eldest sibling is particularly heightened in families where one or both parents have passed away. Secondly, they uphold a principle of reciprocity even in their relationships with their offspring. Consequently, they deviate from the first principle as they no longer fulfil needs based on *civic duty*

or *legal obligations* but respond out of a *socially imposed obligation to reciprocate*, offering "at least something they possess." This refers to a part of themselves, their sympathy, and recognition, given in return. The same mindset and thus the same signs of acknowledgement can be detected in extra-familial social interactions. Here we recognize the principle of the Maussian gift (Mauss, 2007). The three types of obligations—to give, to receive, to reciprocate—that characterize the gift, facilitate the social relations of Moldovans.

An analysis of these exchanges offers a limited but insightful glimpse into some of the defining traits of social and economic organization, as well as consumption habits, prevalent in both the migrant community and the original society. The parcels serve as vessels transporting goods that symbolize the *exchange of lifestyles, production, and consumption patterns* amongst the participants. They also carry memories (of a homemade product, of fruit harvested from one's childhood garden - "treasures imbued with traces of Moldovan sun, rain, earth; a memento of those who hold us in their thoughts," as quoted by Sandu, a 39-year-old corporate executive with a Master's degree in France), or *markers of social differentiation through the consumption of goods "from abroad"* in Moldova. While these two aspects may seem contradictory, they are not mutually exclusive.

"They send us everything [i.e., food] that can be found in a household in the countryside, even meat when it's cold enough outside. Otherwise, we receive cheese, vegetables, fruits, homemade preserves, honey, and bacon. They send them to us for the "home flavor". Everything tastes better there [in Moldova]. And we know how these products were made or grown. Sometimes, we receive homemade wine. [...] For us, parcels are not an economic necessity. On the contrary, it's a hassle [he laughs], because we have to go and pick them up at the other end of Paris, we have to carry that heavy bag on the metro, and we also pay for transportation. Bref! But it is important for our parents and for us." Sandu (39 years old, Master's degree, student/ company executive)

Based on Sandu's interview, it seems that there are several motivations behind these exchanges. First, a significant part of the motivation seems to come from a desire to maintain a cultural connection with Moldova.

The products that are being sent from "home" are not just food. They are reminders of home, symbols of a way of life that is deeply connected to traditional methods of food production. Sandu specifically mentions the

superior taste of these products and the knowledge of how they were made or grown, which adds to their value. Another crucial motivation is the maintenance of family bonds. Despite acknowledging that the parcels are a hassle to collect and transport, Sandu mentions that the parcels are important for his parents and for him. This statement indicates that the exchange of goods is a way of upholding familial responsibilities and connections. Also, the continued use and consumption of products from their home country help the family maintain their identity and connection to their Moldovan heritage while living in Paris.

The parcels, acting as conduits that traverse the “bridge” and connect migrants to non-migrants, the host country

to the country of origin, bear social indicators in both directions. They embody emotions such as love, altruism, individual and collective memory, as well as the logic of giving and reciprocity. These elements serve as crucial pillars sustaining the multifaceted mechanism of material circulation. It is important to note that this mechanism operates through several equally significant points of support. The specific logic governing this circulation varies depending on the actors involved in these exchanges. For transporters, a commercial logic prevails within the “guarded borders” framework upheld by cooperative behaviors. On the other hand, migrants and non-migrants are driven by multiple economic and social logics, encompassing aspects of redistribution, reciprocity, and altruism.

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of sending and receiving parcels among Moldovan immigrants residing in France has become a structural component in their lives, reflecting global trends of migrant communities maintaining strong ties with their countries of origin. This practice occurs in a broader context marked by economic instability in Moldova and increasing globalization, which facilitates international migration.

The findings from this study, grounded in ethnographic data gathered from Moldovan migrants in Paris during a 2017 survey, demonstrate that the exchange of parcels between migrants and their family members in Moldova has reshaped the material flow associated with Moldovan migration into a supranational social structure. This structure, metaphorically likened to a bridge, has its unique operational principles—both commercial and reciprocal—and involves a variety of participants (transporters, migrants, non-migrants) in equal measure.

In an attempt to decode the various principles that engage these participants within the material flow related to migration, I have highlighted the tangible and symbolic procedures inherent in the parcel transfer mechanism. This mechanism serves as a conduit that bridges the gap between communities of individuals living in different societies (migrants in

France and non-migrants in Moldova), transcending national boundaries.

With regard to the parcel transfer mechanism, it operates on its own unique principles, blending both commercial and reciprocal elements, which contributes to its flexibility and proliferation. Beyond these features, it acts as a unifying factor for the migrant community, offering a platform for mutual assistance, intra-community service exchanges, and the reinforcement of the collective identity of migrants. It also serves as the main avenue for economic and social interactions with the home country's community. The driving forces behind this material flow make it a two-way process, encompassing social aspects such as basic forms of wealth redistribution, reciprocity, and altruism.

Despite the insights provided by this research, it's important to acknowledge its limitations. The study focused exclusively on Moldovan migrants in France, and while the findings may have implications for other migrant groups, the specific cultural, economic, and social factors at play in this context mean that the results may not be universally applicable. Future research should, therefore, aim to explore similar practices among different migrant populations and in different host countries.

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