Romanian Journal of Population Studies

Vol. XVII, No. 1
January - June 2023

Special issue: "Children Left Behind by Labour Migration"

Guest Editor: Mihaela Hărăguş

Contents

Guest Editor's Note

The present thematic issue on *Children Left Behind by Labour Migration* brings together research results under the CASTLE multinational action research project (Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU). The project's main objective has been to assess the needs and rights of left-behind children in the two beneficiary countries (Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova) and to formulate recommendations and enact action for their support. The CASTLE project has run from June 2021 to December 2023 and was hosted by the Babeş-Bolyai University (Romania). The host institution was joined in its efforts in the project by two academic partners, namely the Ukrainian Institute for Social Research after Oleksander Yaremenko, and the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. Civil society partners were the Terre des Hommes delegation in Romania, Terre des Hommes Ukraine, and Terre des Hommes Moldova.

As originally stated in the application, the CASTLE action aimed to support the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in improving their child protection frameworks and migration and mobility policies, with a focus on the social and legal impacts of labour migration on transnational families. The action analysed the situation of children left behind by parents who engaged or are engaging in labour migration, from the perspective of children's rights and possibly within the framework of transnational family practices that create, observe, and enforce such rights. For this purpose, the intervention aims to develop a multigenerational, intersectional, and participative qualitative analysis of child rights in a transnational family context.

In order to create the socially inclusive epistemological background for supportive action aimed at improving the rights situation of children left behind, the research segment of the CASTLE action targets several focal points in the lives of labour migrant families. These include the legal and policy context, as well as different instances connected with the wellbeing of children in transnational families, such as the general awareness and performance of child rights principles, effective child participation in the organization of care, family communication and the social dynamics of care.

The impact of migration on the family in the home country is complex, multi-channelled and context-dependent (Démurger 2015). While there are many intervening factors that may translate the migration experience into negative consequences, on the contrary, in other instances, parental migration may also induce positive consequences on family members remaining in the homepp country. Among the highly important mediating factors are: the reason of migration, the identity of the migrant (age and gender), duration of migration, the identity of the carer (continuity vs discontinuity of care), the parent-child relation prior to departure, the legal status/working arrangements of the migrant, as well as the transnational communication practices employed (Bezzi 2013; Gheaus 2014; Cebotari et al. 2016; Madianou 2016; Gassmann et al. 2017; Cebotari 2018; Frenyo 2019; Lam and Yeoh 2019). Consequently, there is no clear-cut positive/negative impact on migration on children who remained at home and therefore, it is rather a discussion of risks vs benefits (or disadvantages vs advantages, negative vs positive outcomes). Negative outcomes have received more attention in the literature than the possible benefits. The main vulnerabilities are connected to children's emotional wellbeing and the host of subsequent problems that might arise, while main benefits derived are of economic nature.

Increased vulnerability for family members remaining at home arises when migration is motivated by poverty, corruption and structural unemployment or underemployment in the place of origin (Gheaus 2014). The individual experiences of children left behind are strongly shaped by the family backgrounds and the socio-cultural contexts of belonging (Bezzi 2013), as hardships and dysfunctionalities may exist prior to migration.

The development of communication technology transformed the digitally mediated provision of care into a clear reality of the present world, increasingly manifest in mobility and migration contexts. Care moves across transnational spaces, is carried out in different spheres and at different care sites, and the call for "de-demonizing distance, or at least removing the assumption that distance is implicitly a barrier to care exchange" (Baldassar 2016: 161) appear as self-explanatory.

Articles reunited in this issue address the situation of children with migrant parents from different perspectives: of their own, of their migrant parents or their caretakers, of the public authorities. Elena Vaculovschi and Galina Țurcan focus in their article on the challenges for the socialization process of the stay-behind children, from family members' and public authorities' perspective. Daniela Angi discusses parents' and children's perspective on the challenges that parental migration generates for school

related performance and activities. Dorin Vaculovschi addresses the needs and issues faced by the children left behind, accounting for their own view, as well as for the view of adults in their surroundings (migrant parents and caretakers). Mara Birou and Iulia Hossu analyse the particularities of social policies and their transnational dimension in Romania and Moldova, from the perspective of key stakeholders. Éva László and Cristina Triboi present the outcomes of the YouCreate participatory action research model as a promising method of involving young people in adolescent-led projects aimed at social change, in the context of parental migration.

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The Socialization of Stay-behind Children in the Republic of Moldova Following Labour Migration of their Parents

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Abstract. The labour migration of parents influences stay-behind children, their state of mind and their socialization process. The influences can be both positive and negative. This article analyses how the labour migration of parents from the Republic of Moldova to the European Union influences the process of socialization of stay-behind children and explores the involvement of public authorities in the socialization of these children. Data on which the paper is based were collected in the Republic of Moldova from December 2021 through April 2022, in the course of the development of the CASTLE project. The paper reflects the opinions of members of the transnational families on stay-behind children's socialization**.** The socialization process of children left at home following the labour migration of their parents faces several challenges. The knowledge of these challenges and their causes can contribute to the establishment of directions and mechanisms for the realization of public policy oriented towards solving children's social challenges. Given current conditions, organized efforts are required from all socialization agents for the effective socialization of stay-behind children.

Keywords: stay-behind children, labour migration, socialization, transnational families, migrant parents, agents of socialization, public authorities.

1. Introduction

International migration, and especially labour migration is one of the most striking phenomena that characterizes the current situation in the Republic of Moldova. Labour migration, currently, is distinguished by a fairly high percentage of emigrants and is affecting a significant part of the country's population. The phenomenon of external labour migration appeared in the Republic of Moldova in the early 2000s. One of the main reasons for this type of migration was and continues to be the lack of adequate employment opportunities along with poverty, low wages and political instability.

As a result of the external labour migration many transnational families emerge – families whose members are spread across at least two countries. In these families one or more spouses usually work abroad while other members remain in the country of origin. Migration from the Republic of Moldova to the European Union comes in various forms. Parents either migrate without children, leaving them at home with a caregiver, either only one parent goes abroad leaving children with the second parent, or they migrate together with their children (family migration). Thus, some parents who work abroad take their children with them. However, not all parents have this opportunity. Most parents have to leave their children at home for various reasons, such as financial constraints or a transient nature of the work that migrants may encounter at their destinations (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011; Vaculovschi 2017). Leaving minor children in the care of one parent (in the case of complete families) is already difficult for the stay-at-home parent and for stay-behind children. Leaving children with their grandparents, with relatives and strangers becomes more difficult for stay-behind children. As an exception, some parents leave their children at home alone the stay-at-home parent , which constitutes an alarming social problem. Due to the external labour migration, a high number of stay-behind children in the Republic of Moldova have emerged. The number of these children is imposing, especially when compared to the total population in the country. At the beginning of 2021, according to the CER-103 survey (Children at risk and children separated from their parents) run by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the total number of children separated from their parents was 34,107, from which 24,763 children were from rural areas. Of these, 29,186, including 21,684 from rural areas, are children both of whose parents/only parent are temporarily abroad (Statistical Report on children at risk and children separated from their parents in 2021)

The labour migration of parents influences stay-behind children, their state of mind and their socialization process. The influences can be both

positive and negative. A study carried out in Romania shows that in most cases the parents' migration causes an increase in the standard of living of the child left at home. And "beyond material well-being, children of migrants, especially those with both parents gone, tend to have a greater share of the experience of travelling abroad compared to other children. 34% of children with both migrant parents travelled abroad, as opposed to only 14% of non-migrant children. 20% of the children with both parents gone spent their summer vacation in 2006 abroad with their parents" (Toth et al. 2007: 9). An important source of support for those who stay at home, including children, are remittances and "although the migration of household members may come at the cost of separation and loss, it can also bring advantages, such as the potential for development through remittances" (Cebotari, Siegel, Mazzucato 2018: 16). As for the negative effects, children left behind are more prone to psychological and emotional stress, feelings of abandonment, and low self-esteem, all of which may ultimately cause damage to the child's overall development and patterns of socialization (de la Garza 2010). One of the major challenges that stay-behind children encounter is the distortion of their socialization process that can lead to the formation of a morally distorted personality, to conflicts of stay-behind children with the norms and values in the society and to deviant behaviours (Banciu 2002; Caraman 2008; UNICEF 2015).

This article analyses how the labour migration of parents from the Republic of Moldova to the European Union influences the process of socialization of stay-behind children and explores the involvement of public authorities in the socialization of these children.

2. Labour migration from the Republic of Moldova

In the past 30 years, Moldova registered massive emigration flows, which impacted the majority of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. According to the data presented by the European Training Foundation in Skills and Migration Country Fiche Moldova, practically every second family is involved in this process (Table 1).

This massive migration push has had two main socioeconomic effects. The first is the huge impact of remittances on economic growth and population living conditions. Remittances can favourably influence both macroeconomic growth and long-term economic growth (Prohniţchi and Lupuşor 2013; Toacă and Tolocico 2017). The second effect of the migration is clearly negative in the form of an overall deterioration of human capital development in the country in terms of brain drain, ageing of the population

structure and lower incentives to work. Thus, the "*brain drain* represents a form of skilled labour migration whereby the investments in education made by the country of origin are considered to be irrecoverable" (Moșneaga 2017: 28).

Table 1. Key migration indicators

Key migration indicators

		1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020
4a	Total emigrants	625 683	620 036	602 782	715 599	827 763	911 446	1 013 417	1 159 443
4b	International migrants: emigrants (% of total population)	14.3	14.3	14.3	17.2	20.3	22.4	25.1	28.7
	Emigrants by sex								
5a	Females (emigrants)	335 072	322 165	303 511	373 283	443 724	490 359	539 532	605 123
5b	Females (as a % of total emigrants)	53.6	52.0	50.4	52.2	53.6	53.8	53.2	52.2
5c	Males (emigrants)	290 611	297 871	299 271	342 316	384 039	421 087	473 885	554 320
5d	Males (as a % of total emigrants)	46.4	48.0	49.6	47.8	46.4	46.2	46.8	47.8

Source: Skills and Migration Country Fiche Moldova (2021)

The negative effects of labour migration are well known, but this phenomenon also has some positive effects: "with their return home, migrants bring not only money, but also new ideas for development, knowledge and new entrepreneurial skills acquired as a result of migration. This way, migrants obviously contribute to the modernization of the country and play a very important role in its intellectual and economic development. Ever since the early 1970s the governments of some countries see international migration as a main tool for development economic" (Vaculovschi 2017: 6).

The normative basis that regulates the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents in the Republic of Moldova is the Law No. 140 of 14-06-2013[1]. This law establishes the procedures for the identification, assessment, assistance, referral, monitoring and record of children at risk and children separated from their parents, as well as the authorities and structures responsible for applying those procedures. The law designates the central authority for child protection - the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection, empowered to elaborate, promote and monitor the implementation of the state policy in the field of child protection, and the

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[1]LAW No. 140 of 14-06-2013 regarding the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents. https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=110518&lang=ro.

local tutelary authority, namely the town halls of villages (communes) and cities.

Sometimes, policies in both the sending and the receiving countries are ill equipped to confront the difficulties associated with transnational family arrangements (Mazzucato 2011: 709). However, policy and programme interventions need to recognize the specificity of problems encountered by children left behind. It is also important for policy-makers to intervene without exacerbating inequalities within out-migration communities and without reinforcing prejudiced images of members of migrant households, depicting them as different, or even privileged (Cortes 2007).

3. Previous research on stay-behind children following labour migration in the Republic of Moldova

The aspects of labour migration from the Republic of Moldova and the impact of this migration on stay-behind children, their education and socialization were investigated in the works of many Moldovan researchers. Thus, M. Buciuceanu-Vrabie (2011) suggested that at present, families make decisions that involve one or both parents migrating and separating from children, with the state having no ability to intervene. A relevant study to the problems of stay-behind children is "Specific needs of children and elderly left behind as a consequence of migration" (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011). Based on data collected within a sociological research, this work analyses psychological, social and economic effects of labour migration on children left behind and also on the elderly that stayed at home. The study shows that "the psychological impact on children left behind is characterized by feelings of loneliness, lack of affection, emotional deprivation, which are supplemented by early maturity, anxiety and the fear for their parents' eventual divorce" (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011: 232). However, "the communication of the child with his/her parents through technical means reduces the effects of emotional deprivation" (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011: 233). In the opinion of Robila (2012), a higher economic pressure was associated with children's lower psychological functioning, academic achievement and satisfaction with life. Vaculovschi (2017) emphasized that migration is no longer a phenomenon that affects only those who leave, but also those who remain in the country of origin and those in the destination country. The researcher also mentioned that "as a rule, "voluntary" migration is beneficial for the migrant's development both economically and socially. The return of migrants to the households with which they maintain relations, the financial transfers carried out systematically tend to improve their lives and increase the quality of life of the migrants, and

of their family members" (Vaculovschi 2017: 53). Gorbunov (2020) stated that children affected by parental labour migration show very low values on all modules and integral characteristics of quality of life. The researcher also mentioned that "migration is often the only solution for many families from the Republic of Moldova in order to reduce poverty. The only one, but not the best, because as a result of the migration, both the children of the migrants and their elderly parents suffer" (Gorbunov 2020: 147). Different aspects of the education of stay-behind children were investigated in "Migration and child health in Moldova and Georgia" (Cebotari. et al. 2018). The study found that "regardless of the transnational setting, the overall relationship between migration and children's health is positive or neutral. This finding suggests that more often than not, the benefits of migration overshadow the potential costs of separation" (Cebotari et al. 2018: 17).

4. Theoretical background

The formation of human personality is a result of a complex process of socialization, in which personal, environmental and cultural factors interact. The socialization is a process through which a person develops their human qualities and social potential. It constitutes a complex social process of acquiring knowledge, cultural norms and values by the individual, which allows him to comfortably integrate into society. Socialization is a "process by which the individual learns to become social, a member of society" (Hyman 1973: 529). The process of socialization includes both the processes exposed to social control and the spontaneous processes that influence personality formation. Moreover, the socialization process is the most important social process through which an individual, as a member of the human community, goes through successive stages of transformation through which he develops a certain identity through the accumulation of knowledge, skills, abilities, etc.

The content and the mechanisms of socialization vary from one society to another, from one historical period to another. The process of socialization includes itself both the interaction between individuals and entire sphere of social relations. The socialization is a complex social process, through which the individual develops a personality, integrates into society, acquiring the language, professional knowledge and skills, life and coexistence models. This process is of particular importance for society, because it ensures its continuity through people's assimilation of existing norms, values, ideals, and behaviour patterns. At the same time, socialization ensures the comfort of the individual in the process of his integration into society, ensures the possibility of self-realization within social relations. Several types of

socialization are distinguished – primary socialization, secondary socialization, socialization for the profession, socialization as a family member, political socialization, etc.

During the process of socialization, children are not just a passive element. While previously the socialization was perceived more as a process in which parents were seen primarily as trainers or transmitters of culture and children as empty vessels who simply received norms and values of culture, contemporary sociological theories of socialization perceive the socialization rather as a mainly bidirectional and interactive processes (Maccoby 1992). Children can actively participate in the socialization process. They are not passive recipients of environmental influences or biological forces. Instead, they actively seek out information about appropriate behaviours (Shaffer 2007: 540). However, in order to get through a self-socialization process, to look for and to acquire certain good models of behaviour and knowledge, children must have self-confidence and be encouraged, especially by other family members.

Socialization is vital for children. It represents a first tool for regulating the interactions between the child and the social environment. Socialization has the central role in ensuring the necessary conditions for passing through the developmental stages of childhood and lays the foundation of the individual's personality. A child acquires their earliest impressions of morality, gender relations, political orientation, and discipline by observing and internalizing the behaviour of their parents (Freeman and Showel 1953) In the family, children are in the process of becoming, they are children but also adults in the making. Children are also prepared for their own autonomy within the family. One can get through the process of socialization during their entire life, but even though socialization and resocialization can occur at any point in the life cycle, childhood is a particularly malleable period, when enduring social skills, personality attributes, and social orientations and values are laid down (Maccoby 1992: 1006).

Socialization prepares children for their comfortable integration into society, contributes to getting used to social relationships and roles, to developing appropriate behaviours. For their comfortable integration into society, children must learn to function adequately. This assumes that: if children are to be adequate adults, they must acquire habits, skills, values, and motives that will enable them to (a) avoid deviant behaviour; that is, avoid behaviours that disrupt or place undue burdens on the functioning of other persons in the nested hierarchy of social groups within which individuals live their lives; (b) contribute, through work, to the economic support of self and

family; (c) form and sustain close relationships with others; and (d) be able to rear children in their turn (Maccoby 1972: 1006).

People and the institutions that facilitate the process of socialization are the agents of socialization. The most important agents of socialization are: the family, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, mass media, the Internet, similarity groups, religious organizations and other. Families are only one of many institutions involved in the socialization process and such institutions as schools, religious groups, mass media, and children's groups frequently supplement the training and emotional support functions served by families (Shaffer 2007: 595-596). The family is considered to be one of the main agents of socialization, but it is also the decisive factor for the education of children. It is the environment in which the child is born, lives, develops and is formed, and also forms himself for the life. The importance of the family in the socialization process is substantial due to the fact that this institution influences the individual in the early stages of ontogenesis but also due to the close emotional ties between family members. Thus, the family has an important role in the socialization process, being the first agent of socialization of the individual. Parents have an important role in the process of learning cultural norms and values of a certain society by their children. Children are shaped primarily by the teachings instilled by their parents (Downie et al. 2007).

Among the agents of socialization, the family, as a specific mediator between the child and society, ranks first in terms of its importance and manifests itself especially at the level of primary socialization when the child does not interact very much with other agents of socialization. The most prominent characteristic of the family as a primary socialization agent is the long-term, direct interaction among family members, during which parents and children express their emotions and feelings (Zhang 2015).

Transnational families encounter some obstacles to the socialization process primarily due to the physical distance between their members. When one parent works abroad or even worse, then both parents work abroad, "the child is deprived of the opportunity to form the nuclear model of the family, in which parents and children live together" (Lialiugene and Rupshene 2008: 10). It is not impossible, but it is more "difficult for the child to have an understanding of the values of his parents, their culture and morals, when he is separated from them by a great distance" (Lialiugene and Rupshene 2008: 10). Another important agent of socialization is the school. An effective schooling is very important for the socialization process, contributing substantially to

positive social and emotional (as well as positive academic) outcomes (Shaffer 2007: 540).

5. Methodology

In order to study the impact of labour migration of parents on stay-behind children, a sociological investigation was conducted in the Republic of Moldova in the months of December 2021 to April 2022. In the course of the development of the CASTLE (Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU) project, in the Republic of Moldova 36 adults (migrant parents, parents who stayed home with their children, and caregivers), 11 representatives of public authorities (social workers, mayors, teachers/school psychologists, etc.) and 6 stay-behind children were interviewed. Also, 13 migrant parents and parents who stayed home with their children and 10 children participated in the focus-group discussions. The main aim of the qualitative study in the frame of CASTLE project is to assess the needs and rights of stay-behind children in the two beneficiary countries (Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova) and to formulate recommendations and enact actions for their support. The in-depth interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide that followed the topics proposed for analysis. Focus groups included open questions and exercises in the case of focus groups with children.

6. Findings

6.1. Perspectives on stay-behind children socialization from family members

Families should prepare children for the life as a couple, to prepare them to be good members of their future families. If one or both parents are absent, it becomes difficult to achieve socialization as a family member, to transmit to stay-behind children models of organizing life as a couple, examples of relationships between spouses in the family, examples of resolving family conflicts, etc. This problem is mitigated if stay-behind children are left with their grandparents, who have a complete family, or in the custody of other people, also with a complete family. So, the socialization as a family member of the children left at home is partially compromised because they do not have the possibility to directly observe the relationships and communication between their parents.

In the Republic of Moldova, traditionally, many grandparents help parents to raise and educate their children. That is why, when parents are working abroad, many children stay at home with their grandparents. Grandparents contribute to the socialization of their grandchildren, but the differences in age and mentality create difficulties, sometimes quite great. Certain generational problems arise. For a successful socialization not only a good communication is needed but also a good understanding between the participants in this process. But it seems that grandchildren and grandparents sometimes don't get along, primarily because of a big age difference:

> *"I think, anyway that a lot depends on age, because if we say, the mentality of a teenage girl or a teenager and the mentality of an old woman or an old man… They are two completely different things because they live in an era, but we are a different generation and for us the things they say are something supernatural, something incomprehensible. We have the impression that they don't understand us, and they have the impression that we don't understand them, and that's difficult sometimes."* (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district).

Socialization is a continuous process of knowledge accumulation. For children of school age, the process of socialization in the family continues, but the influence of the school as an important agent of socialization is also added. Many parents help children with their homework. But when parents work abroad, they cannot do this or they can do it with difficulty. When stay-behind children are left at home with grandparents, some of these grandparents cannot help children with their homework and cannot go to school to the parents' meetings. These moments were frequently mentioned by the representatives of all interviewed categories. The fact that some grandparents cannot deal with chores and the stay-behind children have to do all the housework was also mentioned:

> *"I think that it is difficult when children are left with grandparents who are elderly and they can't do so much in the house and they* (children) *are meant to take all the difficulties."* (boy, 17 years old, Cahul district).

There are also challenges regarding the formation of communication skills, the transmission of traditions, including celebrating certain events:

> *"You see that the holidays are celebrated in the family, let's say Christmas, Easter. There are children who have parents. They celebrate them* (holidays) *in the family with their parents. Yes, and we, whose parents are away abroad, we don't have that possibility to have this family spirit,*

with the parents... No, not that this is a pain or a grudge, this is simply missing." (boy, 17 years old, Cahul district).

A harmoniously developed person has a positive attitude towards both sides of life - material and spiritual. The market economy also requires from the individual a rational attitude towards money and the ability to manage it effectively. Parents from transnational families don't always succeed in passing on a successful model of relationships with money to their children due to the fact that some of them are traumatized by the experience of working hard abroad for money and at the same time losing a lot:

"I earned some money, built a house. But I lost the most beautiful years of the children's lives, and first of all, my health." (labour migrant mother of a son aged 17 and a daughter aged 14)

Sometimes children start expecting only money from their parents:

"…her mother has said, that „I'm only a purse for her" (daughter), otherwise I don't exist." (caregiver, woman).

Some of them spend it without thinking. The research reveals some cases in which parents try to compensate their absence with money, but the results of this action are not always the most successful:

"…parents, often feeling guilty, compensate their absence with money. Here, children get out of control and acquire bad behaviours." (stay-behind parent mother of two sons aged 6 and 3, a school psychologist)

Some children start hating money because it ruined their childhood:

"...what is the use of giving me money. I didn't want money anymore. That's why I am saying that I cursed the money and I can remember that I was crying. I was crying a lot." (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district)

So, money are blamed and cursed by some stay-behind children instead of creating a balanced attitude towards it:

"Money stole my childhood, sometimes I regret it, and sometimes I'm glad." (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district)

The migration can generate negative psycho-emotional impact on stay-behind children. This, in turn, can negatively influence the socialization process. A favourable psycho-emotional state is indispensable for achieving a qualitative instructional-didactic process, for successful integration in various collectives,

for communication with peers, etc. Many of the interviewed children said that they are sad and feel empty in their souls because one or both parents are gone:

> *"Sometimes I remember how she went and the emotions and the sadness…*
> *it's like you want to cry."* (boy, 14 years old, Chişinău)

The situation becomes even more difficult when both parents are away working abroad:

> *"... my mother went to Italy to make money, this became a void for me*
> *because I knew when I was little that my father was going abroad, but*
> *when I remained with my sister, grandmother and younger brother I felt*
> *this emptiness."* (girl, 15 years old, Drochia district).

An efficient process of socialization within the family requires constant communication. But within transnational families there are some difficulties in this regard. Migrant parents try to communicate as often as possible with their children left at home: "*Every day, usually in the evening, we talk with the whole family for at least an hour.*" (stay-behind parent mother of two children aged 6 and 3) But virtual communication is not the same as the communication face-to-face: „*Real and virtual man is completely different.*" (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district) Practically all those interviewed and those who participated in the focus group discussions perceive communication through information and communication technologies as a main and effective method of communication, of keeping in touch with those who have left and with those who remained at home. The use of one or more types of communication technology has created more opportunities to keep in touch with relatives. Thus, the use of new technologies within transnational families represents a new and important element in its functionality, although audio or video communication is not the same as face-to-face communication. But obstacles in communication may be encountered even when parents return home:

> *"I'll put it this way: children distance themselves from their parents,*
> *regretfully... I'm very sorry they don't want to talk. Every time I ask them*
> *to tell me something, they are very closed, they have become closed..."*
> (labour migrant mother of a son aged 17 and a daughter aged
> 14)

Thus prolonged separation can disrupt parent-child relationships and generate difficulties in communication.

Parents teach life skills to their children. For children to learn "to live" means also to discuss their and their relatives' problems, to master how to solve them. This is done in some transnational families:

> *"They tell me a lot of family problems, but I can't say that this is a burden. There were many situations when I solved those problems, and that's exactly why, and we all discuss them, that is. I don't think they burden me with them. After all, they are part of the family and* (problems) *must be solved together."* (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district)

However, many family members, especially migrant parents, said they do not share or discuss their problems. This is done rather not to make communication more difficult, which is not too easy at a distance anyway, but also not to "burden" those close to them with their own problems:

> *"I don't want to make them sad and I tell them that everything is fine with me."* (migrant parent, mother of a son aged 12 and a daughter aged 8)

> *"In front of the children, I never tell the problems I'm going through... Never... I think it is not pleasant for a child to find out about the parents' problems."* (migrant parent, father of a daughter aged 15 and three adult sons)

Some of the functions of the socialization performed by the family as a socializing agent, in the case of children whose parents have gone to work abroad, are taken over by other agents of socialization – kindergarten, school, church, etc. These institutions manage to remove some of the gaps in the socialization process of stay-behind children.

The school is one of the key institutions of socialization. Some children left at home declare that they have problems in school with both teachers and peers, which, in our opinion, constitutes a certain impediment to the socialization process:

> *"OK, maybe we were different from other kids, the fact that we were dressed more, more... the fact that I had a phone… but I was more bullied by the teachers."* (girl, 16 years old, Cahul district)

Some classmates discriminate stay-behind children considering them to be abandoned:

> *"The discrimination appears. Some children simply think that our parents, who are abroad, have abandoned us."* (girl, 16 years old, Drochia district)

Sometimes, the absence of parents makes it difficult for stay-behind children to have a good academic success because there is no one to support and encourage them:

> *"I think that when parents are away, children at school don't have a good academic success. I know that when some children go home no one is asking them: what grade you got and that means they don't encourage you. But a parent, I think… it influences you more when they tell you: you can do more. It's different when your parent supports you, when they are near you, when they tells you that you need to do more."* (girl, 15 years old, Orhei district)

As can be seen, many aspects of the socialization process of stay-behind children are hampered by the fact that parents are working abroad.

6.2. The involvement of local authorities in stay-behind children's socialization

The results of the research show that representatives of the local public authorities carefully monitor the situation of stay-behind children and are involved in different activities that are meant to support these children. They are fully aware of the fact that parents had to go to work abroad:

> *"We were all children and we know what it means to raise children alongside parents, but we should take into account that parents did not leave in vain, they left specifically to make a future for their children."* (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village).

The representatives of the local public authorities realize that the phenomenon of stay-behind children creates challenges related to the education and socialization of these children:

> *"...even if a single child were to stay with… without parental protection, I think this is already a problem. ...This departure of our citizens abroad, often solves financial problems and… makes disappear all those human qualities that we inherited from our ancestors."* (representative of local public administration, Cojuşna village)

Some representatives of local public administration mentioned that remaining at home with grandparents, caregivers or custodians is not the same as staying with parents:

> *"I'm not saying that the grandparents or the legal representative - grandmother, sister, brother don't take care, but it still feels..., it's not the*

same as what mother or father can provide when being next to their children... And it is, it's noticeable..." (representative of local public administration, Şoldaneşti district).

Representatives of local public administration should work permanently with stay-behind children, because otherwise, some children do not fulfil the obligations they have:

> *"We constantly work with them because we had problems in which they motivated themselves and did not attend school, kindergarten. But because the Law 140 requires us to keep records and deal with them, it was a bit difficult for us, but most of the problems were solved, because we have no drop-outs at school or kindergarten. We do it."* (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village)

The study of the situation of children from transnational families at the level of Chişinau municipality and that of small towns and villages in the Republic of Moldova showed different results regarding the degree of involvement of public authorities in the process of socialization of these children, in the process of solving children's problems and helping to fulfil their needs. Thus, even if at the municipal level, transnational families exist, not all of them are recorded, because parents are not obliged to inform the authorities about the fact that they leave their children in the care of other people. If a transnational family with problems is identified and an official from the local authority legalizes the child's status, the support mechanism is established for the child who is in difficulty: it can be a psycho-emotional support or provision of different services. Such services within the municipality of Chişinau are provided by the Youth Friendly Centres, which also offer medical and psychological services.

Collaboration between municipal institutions is very important, because in this way not only those children who need help from the public authorities can be identified, but also the priority needs of these children. Inter-sectoral meetings are convened and focus on the problems of children in risk situations, their schooling, records of children, actions to prevent school drop-out.

Currently, the cooperation regarding children that encounter different problems between various administrative structures in the municipality of Chişinau is quite good. If necessary, all municipal structures can connect and collaborate. However, the main problem is that not all stay-behind children have a legal representative:

> *"Transnational families with children left with someone other than a parent, constitute a category that needs support and a separate approach, because these are potential child victims of various situations, not to mention abuse and violence. They are the most vulnerable. That is why some very good, clear mechanisms for taking them into account must be established – mechanisms for working with the families who have these children in their care. So, a program is needed for these families. Thus, there is a need for support programs for all categories of people involved in this unfortunate phenomenon for our country."* (representative of local public administration, Chişinau)

Public authorities cannot always intervene:

> *"... but you can't interfere. We don't have tools. Even in the local community it is possible and known that person X is away, but this is not legalized and the state cannot intervene with material support, even if the people who take care of the child are in difficult situations, because the child is illegally left in their care. The problems are very big due to this lack of instruments regarding the obligation of the parents who are leaving.... It is important to establish the obligation of the parent to support the host family."* (representative of local public administration, Chişinau)

A statistic about stay-behind children at the municipality level is missing due to the lack of clarity regarding the obligation to register children from transnational families. There are some reports created by educational institutions, but these institutions cannot permanently follow the parents' movement: are they gone or have they returned? At the municipality level, it can be assumed that there exist between 3000 and 9000 families with one or both parents gone abroad:

> *"It's hard for me to answer - between 20 and 60 families in one school, and if we multiply by 150 schools, we get the figure..."* (representative of local public administration, Chişinau)

Some representatives of the municipal public administration consider that it is necessary to implement a mandatory record keeping mechanism:

> *"It would be good to have a common base with the police department, with the border police department, with the authorities, with the municipality of Chişinau so that we can all work together and have access to the database and have the real figure."* (representative of local public administration, Chişinau)

Consequently, there are quite a few transnational families in the municipality, but there is no clear record of stay-behind children, those left in the care of a parent or of a third party. In order to solve this situation, an initiative to implement a mandatory record mechanism, unique for the entire country, of children from transnational families would be welcomed.

Local public authorities from the districts of the Republic of Moldova face the same problem. Parents do not always declare that they have left their children in the custody or care of someone:

> *"...we have a big gap in our legislation, that when one parent or both parents are gone abroad, they have to be asked right at the border: with whom they left the children, if all the documents are in order, if the children are in school... and so on."* (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village)

Some changes in law are required:

> *"Parents must be obliged by law to leave their children ...under supervision and they must also bring a support, to pay different taxes for the given country, they must also be involved in society because we cannot just... we require from this state, which is called the Republic of Moldova, but we have to give something more."* (representative of local public administration, Soldaneşti district)

However, in small towns and villages of the Republic of Moldova, the situation differs from that in Chişinau. Due to the fact that the communities are quite small, people know each other better and the record of children left in custody or in someone's care is more complete: *"In our locality... we keep a record of all children left alone"* (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village).

The social worker, the policemen and the family doctor form a multidisciplinary team and monitor children with deviant behaviour, children at risk and stay-behind children as well. The social worker has a register in which they keeps track of these children. It is the same in school institutions where the record is maintained by the director of education. Less often this is done by medical personnel, but there are certain deficiencies. Currently, the medical check-up of children is no longer mandatory as it was before, but rather performed only at the request of the parents or custodian or tutor.

The problems of the children concerned are discussed at the meetings of the local and district councils. It should be mentioned that there is a lack of lawyers in the subdivisions, who could come to the aid of these children. Also, there is a lack of specialists in the field of psychology or psycho-pedagogy

who could provide more assistance to these children. Even guardians and custodians themselves need psychological assistance and maybe some trainings to be able to solve certain problems of children left behind by labour migration. Thus, a representative of local public administration is concerned about the lack of competences of grandparents to take care of their grandchildren:

> *"Those who have parents, especially young parents and know information technologies, they adapt more easily than these children, who are left without parents and don't have these phones, tablets, these computers. They stay behind, they feel more uncomfortable in the company of other children... Today's grandparents didn't have a mobile phone, today's grandparents didn't have a tablet, they didn't have online lessons and they need training, schooling, why not, as in different situations of children's behaviour, to know how to proceed in different situations."*
> (representative of local public administration, Soldaneşti district)

The presence of specialists in the problems of families with children at risk and with stay-behind children is of great support for these families. When these families can apply for social assistance to solve some of their problems, including financial ones, when they are in the sights of the local community social worker, then the situation improves.

In the Republic of Moldova, there are psycho-pedagogical services at the district level, but not all of these services are staffed with psychologists. There are not enough child protection specialists in most town halls. This office should be established at least in localities with no fewer than 1500 inhabitants. There are not enough lawyers in the town halls to offer help in the case of transnational families.

At the level of educational institutions, there are different sections, circles, creative centres, but the teaching staff need to pay more attention to this category of children. Many schools have no licensed psychologists who could more effectively solve the problems of children left behind by labour migration:

> *"I also said that they need more, not just the material part but the moral part, they need the support of their colleagues, of the pedagogues with these students and of the psychologists who are in the educational institutions."*
> (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village)

The development of skills among teachers to deal with the problems faced by children whose parents are away working abroad is also welcome. Some of the interviewees drew attention to the following situation:

> *"A young mother dresses her child differently, a young mother and a young father talk to the child differently..."* (representative of local public administration, Şoldaneşti district)

During socialization, including primary socialization within the family, eating patterns, clothing styles, etc. are transmitted to children. And even though grandparents usually love their grandchildren very much, there may appear more difficulties in establishing agreements and passing on patterns regarding food, clothing, haircuts, use of gadgets, etc. This is primarily due to the generation gap, especially when guardians or grandparents are too old. One of the main goals of socialization is the comfortable integration into society. And when children are dressed or combed very differently, and what's worse, old-fashioned, they differ a lot from their fellows, and this does not bring them the desired comfort. This was repeatedly emphasized:

> *"Yes, older people, indeed, may not know the information and may remain under the impression that it is. But the youth, yes, they have a different approach and they somehow understand differently... "* (social worker, Străseni district)

Thus, some of the stay-behind children stand out among their peers and they can be mocked or they can become victims of bullying. Appointing an elderly person as a custodian is not always the best opportunity:

> *"who could be established as a guardian? For example, you can also put a grandmother of..., I tell you..., 70-75 years old, walking with cane... What can the grandmother offer the child? Yes, she will wash him, yes, she will make him a mouthful of food, she will give him... Yes, more than that, the grandmother cannot offer him... Even the meetings… to come to school, to see, to talk with the teachers or even to get involved... She really doesn't have the time or the possibility..."* (social worker, Străseni district)

Among the solutions for better involving and informing stay-behind children, a show is proposed:

> *"an educational hour or support for underprivileged children, for children left without a mother, a father, would be a show that could attract and no matter how psychologically destroyed he would know: I go to the show what and I know that I will get rich, I will hear something, I will gain*

> *knowledge and I think it would be a very important thing... it would interest the child to watch the show, to accumulate the information that he does not have around him, that he does not receive from those around him."* (representative of local public administration, Chirileni village)

Also, a designated space for play activities to distract stay-behind children from their problems would be useful:

> *"I think that not only for children left without parents, i.e. with parents gone abroad, but also for all children from our village, a... a hall where there would be... more fun games for all the children would be welcome. I think that would be the greatest benefit and a help to the children. I mean, it would save them a little more from their problems if they have them, so to speak."* (representative of local public administration, Filipeni village)

The forms of involvement of local public authorities in the process of socialization of stay-behind children are diverse. For example, in Budeşti commune, in collaboration with civil society representatives, the local public authorities opened a Centre for Children and Youth "UDO JURGENS". The Centre offers children from socially vulnerable families and children from families where one or both parents work abroad various services, monitors the situation of children, including those from migrant families, involves them in extracurricular activities within the Centre. These activities are free because the budget of the Local Public Administration covers the given expenses.

Within the Centre for Children and Youth "UDO JURGENS" there is a psychologist who offers free consultation to both children and their parents. The Centre

> *"represents a safe environment for children and parents as well are confident because we are available 7 days out of 7, and the children have activities… are safe during this period, moreover, teacher-parent contact is maintained to communicate with reference to whether the child has arrived on time, if he started home and other such details."* (director of the Centre for Children and Youth "UDO JURGENS", Budeşti commune)

In the same commune an online communication platform called *"Vocea casei părinteşti"* (The Voice of Parental House) was created in order to inform and to bring awareness to natives/locals, especially to those who work abroad:

> *"It was created exclusively for children and families, both those who remain and those who have gone abroad, so that they can stay connected to the activity of the locality and to what is being done. And even if they are present or abroad, respectively all kinds of announcements about what has been done, what is being done, what is to be done in the community, in other words, a transparent live communication, including opinion polls with reference to certain development projects in the locality. So, we consult them to find out their opinions."* (director of the Centre for Children and Youth *"UDO JURGENS",* Budeşti commune)

Stay-behind children whose migrant parents are working abroad need special attention from the society. And the reason in this case is twofold - the good of the child and the good of the society:

> *"Transnational families with children left with caregivers following the parents' migration constitute a category that needs support and a special approach, because these children are potential victims of various situations, not to mention abuse and violence."* (representative of local public administration, Chişinău)

It is also necessary to pay attention to the socialization process of stay-behind children because a distorted socialization will bring a multitude of problems both at the individual level and at the social level.

7. Conclusions

The socialization process of stay-behind children faces several challenges. The consequences of difficulties of the process of socialization of stay-behind children will be felt over time in the society and they will not be positive. The knowledge of these challenges and of their causes can contribute to establishing the directions and mechanisms for the realization of the public policy that must determine the ways of solving stay-behind children's social problems.

This article pointed out several aspects related to the role of the local public administration in the Republic of Moldova in solving the problems faced by children left behind by labour migration. The authorities in many cases cannot intervene with various measures, because there are no tools to compel parents to inform the authorities. The Law 140 stipulates the requirement for parents to clarify the custody of the remaining children, but there is no mechanism to oblige the parents to draw up the legal custody document. However, the local public administration should keep a record of stay-behind children, evaluate their needs and contribute to their fulfilment.

They should also expand the network of social assistance and psychological services.

Under the current conditions, organized efforts are required from all socialization agents for the effective socialization of stay-behind children. The state and the civil society must be involved in the socialization process of stay-behind children. A joint effort of educators, pedagogues, representatives of public administration and civil society is necessary to help stay-behind children to overcome the problems and to be able to successfully fulfil different social roles in the future. Also, local public authorities should focus more on creating favourable conditions for the socialization of children from transnational families.

Acknowledgements

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Adjusting to Change: School-related Practices and Perceptions in Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families

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Abstract. This paper discusses parents' and children's perspectives on the challenges that parental migration generates for children's school performance and activities, with a focus on transnational families from the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The study is based on interviews and focus-groups with children, migrant parents and parents who stayed at home to look after the young ones. Results show that school-related difficulties are sensitive to post-migration circumstances back home, largely derived from the absence of only one or of both parents, while also affirming the overall resilience of children in relation to their education.

Keywords: education, transnational families, labour migration, children, parental absence, Moldova, Ukraine.

1. Introduction

Often motivated by the pursuit of a better life, international migration amplified the incidence and visibility of families whose members reside in different national contexts, while continuing to function as families, albeit of a transnational kind (Baldassar et al. 2014; Bryceson 2019). The geographical separation of family members, however temporary, shapes circumstances where children have limited access to one or both their parents. Furthermore, in families with children, parents' migration can alter their availability to participate in children's school-related activities. In view of the general importance of parents' involvement in their children's education (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), transnational families are likely to face meaningful challenges in this regard.

This paper discusses the appraisal of school-related aspects in families where one or both parents are temporarily away, due to labour migration, with a focus on transnational families from Moldova and Ukraine. The empirical part builds on the field work carried within the project Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU (CASTLE)[1]. Both contexts[2] under focus are important origin countries for labour migration, which makes the phenomenon of children left behind a widespread occurrence (Borodchuk and Cherenko 2021; UNICEF Moldova 2021).

The main objective of this paper is to examine how children and parents from transnational families undergo and adjust to the circumstances shaped by parental migration, in relation to children's education. In view of that, the paper discusses children's subjective assessment of changes/stability in their school performance in relation to their parent(s)' absence due to migration. While the (actual and subjective) achievement is a relevant facet of their school life, children's study routine and relational aspects – that involve communication with and perceived attitudes of teachers and school peers – are also elements of interest. Both absent (migrant) and present parents' perspectives on the evolution of children's school life are considered in the analysis. A second aim of the study is related to the particular situations within families: in some contexts, both parents are absent (either because both are abroad or the family was a single-parent one prior to migration), whereas in other settings one of the parents stayed home with the children. Accordingly, the paper addresses the challenges in handling parental responsibilities associated to children's schooling in relation to the above variation of migratory practices within families. A final objective addressed in the paper is to explore the gender dimension of parental involvement, inquiring whether children's and parents' perspectives on school-related aspects depend on whether the mother or the father is the absent parent.

The first section of the paper reviews the meanings and forms of parental involvement in education, with a focus on mechanisms by which parents' inputs can facilitate children's achievement in school. Aspects related to the impact of family attributes on parental involvement in children's school life are also covered in the discussion. The next part introduces migration as a consequential event in families' lives, whereby children find themselves

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[1] CASTLE is an action research project implemented by partners from Moldova, Romania and Ukraine, and examines the dynamics of Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families where at least one parent went abroad for work. Details at https://fspac.ubbcluj.ro/castleaction/en.

[2] The study does not address the separation of families generated by Russia's reprehensible attack on Ukraine, in the Spring of 2022.

temporarily away from one or both their parents. In view of that, the second section discusses the ways in which parental absence influences children's educational outcomes, through a review of the relevant literature. The empirical section of the paper describes and discusses the findings based on interviews with members of transnational families from Moldova and Ukraine. The analysis covers the perspectives offered by children who stayed in the countries of origin, migrant parents and parents who remained home to look after the young ones. The paper ends with a discussion section.

2. Parental involvement in children's education - meanings and effects

Parents' involvement in education generally refers to their "interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" (Hill et al. 2004: 1491). Entailing a variety of practices aimed to support children's school advancement, the multidimensional nature of parental involvement is frequently emphasized in the literature (see for example Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994; Castro et al. 2015).

For Pomerantz et al. (2007), the demarcation "between involvement based at school and that based at home" (p. 374) is a useful way to capture the wide-range of support activities, while also acknowledging that parental involvement takes place in diverse realms and with possibly different impacts on their children. Stressing the complex nature of parental involvement, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) argue that three key dimensions are involved in this process: parents' behaviours in relation to children's school, activities that support children's cognitive/intellectual advancement, and a personal dimension that captures children's perceptions of how engaged their parents are with respect to their school life.

Yet, how exactly does parental involvement foster their children's school performance? And what kind of parental involvement is conducive to better school results?

According to Hill and Taylor (2004), involvement with children's schools allows parents to develop their "social capital" (p. 162), by gaining access to essential knowledge about what is expected from children at school and about how they can support children's learning tasks. In this approach, both teachers and other children's parents are valuable sources from which relevant information can be learnt. The same authors mention "social control" (Hill and Taylor 2004: 162) as another mechanism at work, referring to the joint effort of schools and parents to establish behavioural guidelines for children.

Parental involvement is examined by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) in relation to its effects on children's motivational abilities, the latter being assumed to have an impact on school achievement. Along these lines, it is found that certain forms of parental involvement shape children's "perceived competence and control understanding" (Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994: 249), which in turn enhance their school results.

A similar approach that assumes a mediated relationship between involvement and success, via motivational aspects, is used by Ginsburg and Bronstein (1993), who focus on parents' ability to cultivate children's motivation for learning, as a means to boost their academic success. Highlighting the benefits of intrinsic motivation for performance, the authors show that parents can foster this type of attitude towards learning by using encouragement and by employing a parenting style that supports autonomy. The latter was also found to positively impact school achievement (Ginsburg and Bronstein 1993).

Further parental practices with a positive impact on children's academic results are revealed by Castro et al. (2015). The results of their meta-analytical study show that the strongest effect on achievement is exerted by parents' expectations in relation to their children's future educational attainment level.

Additional insights on both the benefits and limits of parental involvement are offered by studies that focus on homework. While communication with teachers, and participation in school-based meetings and activities capture an important part of what parents (can) do to support their children's education, a significant share of their involvement happens at home (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Parents' involvement in homework covers a diverse range of supporting activities; Gonida and Cortina (2014) refer in this sense to: "providing space and materials for doing the homework, developing rules to avoid distractions, tutoring, and doing the homework with the child" (p. 376).

In their analysis, Patall et al. (2008) find that "[s]etting rules about when and where homework should be done" (p. 1090) is a particularly effective approach for parents to support their children's success. Such strategy "entails clearly communicating expectations, providing guidelines, and reinforcing behaviour when rules are followed" (Patall et al. 2008: 1090).

Underlining that school results are not the only outcome of interest when it comes to assessing parents' inputs, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) argue that parental involvement in homework can help children develop perspectives that further support their learning and school activity, reflected in "attitudes about homework, perceptions of personal competence" (p. 204). Likewise, Gonida and Cortina (2014) explore the mechanisms that mediate the relation between parental involvement in homework and children's

achievement, finding that children with "[a]utonomy-supportive parents" (p. 390) are likely to be more successful in school. This happens because, unlike parenting styles based on interference or control, parenting that endorses children's autonomy fosters "student motivational development in the form of mastery goals and skill acquisition resulting in better achievement" (Gonida and Cortina 2014: 390).

Along these lines, there is a lack of consensus around the idea that parental involvement in homework is inexorably associated with a high level of achievement (see Moroni et al. 2015; Patall et al. 2008). A possible explanation for the negative relationship found between involvement and achievement has to do with the directionality of the association, meaning that children who perform poorly in schools are likely to receive most help from their parents in preparing their homework (Jeynes 2005; Patall et al. 2008). Moreover, the type of involvement used by parents does matter. Cooper et al. (2000) refer in this sense to parents' interfering practices whereby, seeking to help their children in completing their assignments, they end up making tasks more difficult and confusing.

The literature suggests that the extent of parental involvement and its effects on children's performance are influenced by internal attributes of families, such as its structure (Jeynes 2005) and socio-economic status (Hill and Taylor 2004). Referring to adolescents, Jeynes (2005) found that their success is enhanced in circumstances where they have access to both parents and when communication on school-related issues is a regular part of the family routine. The same author found the above aspects to be more important for school performance than parents' participation in school events or support for homework. Apart from structure, families vary with respect to their socio-economic conditions. Compared to parents belonging to less affluent strata, parents with higher socio-economic profile are more prone to cultivate a regular involvement in their children's school-life (Hill and Taylor 2004).

An important question regarding parental involvement in education concerns the specific inputs that mothers and fathers respectively have in supporting their children's school performance. Often, research treats parental involvement homogeneously, without a gender-specific angle (Kim 2018; Kim and Hill 2015), or tends to be focused primarily on mothers' engagement (Hill and Taylor 2004). However, on the basis of studies that capture the gender facet of parenting, it is possible to outline some differences in how maternal and paternal involvement is practised and how it impacts children's performance. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that, compared to fathers, mothers have a stronger engagement in virtually all the education-supporting

activities explored in the analysis. Moreover, they showed that mothers' routes of influence are somewhat richer and more complex, involving both direct and indirect effects (mediated by motivational factors) on children's' school results (Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994). In a meta-analysis of studies where parents' gender is specified, Kim (2018) found that fathers are less involved than mothers in activities that take place in their children's schools. She links this finding to the gender specificity of parental roles, which are construed in accordance with prevailing social norms. Moreover, Kim and Hill (2015) showed that the link between "school - based involvement" (p. 928) and children's results is more pronounced for mothers, claiming that – in line with socially sanctioned beliefs about gender roles – the motivations and impact of contacting schools are different for mothers and fathers respectively.

As children move through successive stages in their school trajectory and reach the age of adolescence - which often implies a higher sense of autonomy - parents' participation in school matters needs to be recalibrated (Patall et al. 2008) and might become less intense and less wide-ranging (Hill and Tyson 2009). Even so, parental involvement is neither absent, nor irrelevant during the teen years. Hill and Tyson (2009) find that teenagers' school achievement is benefited when parents respect children's increasing autonomy, while remaining involved through open dialogue about aspirations, expectations in relation to school, and importance of education.

The next section discusses how the mechanisms previously described are altered by circumstances of limited parental availability as a result of labour migration.

3. Parents' migration and its impact on the education of children who stayed at home

Frequently anticipated as a means to improve households' living conditions, families' decisions to pursue migration – whereby one or both parents leave their home country to work abroad – temporarily disrupt the ordinary circumstances in which children lead their lives. Depending on the available resources and the configuration of their intra-familial networks, migrant parents in transnational families rely on different solutions regarding the care of children who remain in the home country (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). In some cases, child tending can be kept within family, either because one of the parents stayed home or because help from the extended family is available; in other situations, children are looked after by caregivers who are not part of the family or have to take care of themselves (Mazzucato and Schans 2011).

There is by now a rich literature dealing with the multiple effects that parental migration exerts or might exert over children who remain at home, in terms of psychological well-being, health, and education (see for example Antman 2013; Robila 2011; Schapiro et al. 2013; Vanore et al. 2015). A key insight produced by the available research highlights the heterogeneity of reactions that children manifest in response to parental migration, with children's age and gender, and migrant parent's gender being important sources of variability (Robila 2011; Schapiro et al. 2013).

For transnational families, the availability of communication means is of central importance, as it enables their members to remain connected, from afar (Baldassar et al. 2014). Parents are thus able to stay aware of their children's routines, communicate about school issues and assist them with their homework (Dreby 2010; Madianou 2014).

On the subject of children' education specifically, research does not seem to converge towards a unique verdict, as different studies reach diverging conclusions regarding the impact exerted by parental migration. Part of the variation found at the level of empirical findings stems from the specificity of economic and cultural contexts of home countries (Jordan et al. 2018), children's attributes (Arguillas and Williams 2010), and the overall outlook of the migration scenario, meaning which parent is absent and for how long (Clifton-Sprigg 2019). Moreover, as developed throughout this section, there are multiple processes involved in children's education, therefore the effects of parental absence can be examined in relation to a variety of educational outcomes: school attendance, risk of or actual dropout, educational aspirations, and school performance (often related to how much time is allocated for homework and learning).

The remainder of this section discusses this diversity of approaches and findings that reveal positive, mixed or negative developments in the educational trajectory of children left at home, in conjunction with the mechanisms that link parental migration with changes in youngsters' school life.

On data referring to Romanian children ages 11-15, Botezat and Pfeiffer (2020) find school performance to be positively impacted by parental migration. The authors propose potential explanations related to the enabling effect of remittances invested in education, children valuing education more (possibly as a form of gratitude towards parents) and the supportive input of extended family in securing a comfortable caregiving context for children (Botezat and Pfeiffer 2020).

Jordan et al. (2018) refer to research concerned with parental absence altering the way children spend their time, as taking over more household-related tasks, engaging in paid work, or allocating more time for leisure might diminish their involvement in homework. However, in their own study on migrant families, the above authors find that Nigerian and Filipino children whose parents are both abroad for work in fact dedicate their time to homework; they interpret this result as reflecting children's gratitude for their parents' efforts or the greater value of schooling professed within these families (Jordan et al. 2018). An absence of negative effects of parental migration on education is also underlined by Clifton-Sprigg (2019), with a focus on Poland. In this case, when a positive impact is detectable, it is likely to be found among children with educated parents, and in situations where migration did not burden children with additional household duties (Clifton-Sprigg 2019).

Remittances can greatly facilitate the educational chances of children from migrant families, as shown by Yang (2008) in the context of Philippines. Specifically, the enhanced resources of families allow higher investment in children's education, along with reducing the young's involvement in labour (Yang 2008). A gender-sensitive effect on educational attainment is found by Antman (2012), who shows that, by virtue of remittances, international migration benefits Mexican children, and that its impact is stronger for girls, compared to boys.

Yet the positive impact above described is not always detected in empirical studies. Rather, there seems to be a lack of agreement on the effect of remittances on various aspects related to the education of children left behind, as a number of intervening processes potentially affect this relationship (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Thus, the way children are able to divide their time between school and household tasks - often connected to which parent is absent, the caregiving arrangement and the corresponding support received for school activities, as well as the extent to which education is deemed as important for later success are all elements that mediate the link between increased well-being prompted by remittances and educational results (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012).

Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo (2010) isolate the influence that remittances and migration respectively exert on children's schooling in the Dominican Republic, showing that school attendance is positively affected by remittances, yet this beneficial impact is neutralized by the "disruptive effect of family migration" (p. 1756). Furthermore, McKenzie and Rapoport (2011) note that remittances are often the primary migration-related mechanism being analyzed in relation to children's schooling, being likely to suggest positive, yet

misleading effects of migration. Moreover, approaches of the sort tend to underestimate the impact of other migration-related dynamics, such as additional household tasks for children and diminished "parental inputs into education acquisition" (McKenzie and Rapoport 2011: 1332). Looking at how parental migration impacts the educational outcomes of Mexican children, the authors find that both attendance and attainment are negatively affected for children belonging to migrant families (McKenzie and Rapoport 2011). A similar result is found by Lu (2014) in relation to children from migrant families in Mexico and Indonesia. The negative impact on children's school progress - assessed by considering the educational level completed in relation to pupils' age - is interpreted by Lu (2014) as an indication that the non-economic effects of parental absence might cancel the otherwise positive impact of remittances.

Arguillas and Williams (2010) find mixed effects of parental migration among Filipino children. On the one hand, children whose mothers are abroad appear to have an advantage in terms of length of completed schooling compared to those living with both their parents. On the other hand, in situations where both parents are away for work, boys are negatively affected with respect to completed years of schooling (Arguillas and Williams 2010).

For Moldova and Georgia, Cebotari, Siegel and Mazzucato (2016) find "no evidence of adverse effects on children's school performance when mothers migrate and fathers are caregivers or when both parents migrate and grandparents are caregivers" (p. 102). These results underline the importance of caregiving arrangements that can successfully counterbalance the potential effects of mothers' absence (Cebotari et al. 2016). Similarly, the importance of post-migration home circumstances is evident in the study by Gassmann, Siegel, Vanore and Waidler (2013), focused on Moldovan children. In the said study, the length of mother's absence has a positive association with children's education, yet in situations where children are looked after by "someone other than the parent or grandparent" (Gassmann et al. 2013: 23), education is negatively affected.

Udrea and Guiu's (2022) study, focused on Romanian adolescents from rural areas, shows that for some youngsters the drive to succeed in school is linked to how they process their parents' migration decision and, relatedly, to children acknowledging their parents' efforts. Conversely, parents' departure can also result in diminished motivation and a perceived deficit of support, leading to decreased school performance (Udrea and Guiu 2022).

The fact that migration can have opposite effects on different aspects of children's school-life is exemplified by Kandel and Kao (2001), who find that children from Mexican migrant families have better school grades, yet lower academic aspirations. The authors thus confirm the link between school performance and increased resources in the family, while also noting that exposure to migration lowers youngsters' ambitions to aim for university degrees, as working abroad becomes an appealing way for economic advancement (Kandel and Kao 2001).

Several studies reveal more conclusively detrimental effects of parental migration on school outcomes. Dreby (2007) describes the intervening processes that explain why Mexican children encounter school problems upon their parents' migration abroad, showing that, for some children school difficulties are connected to depression following separation, while for others problems ensue from behavioural issues, related to lack of discipline. Moreover, parents' absence can become a sensitive topic that peers use to torment children left behind, which can also create school difficulties (Dreby 2007). Lastly, when caregivers are unable to provide adequate assistance with learning activities, school problems are likely to arise (Dreby 2007). Discipline-related problems are found by Kandel (2003) to be related to fathers' absence and the difficulties that mothers face in effectively acting like an authority figure. In such circumstances, teachers notice clear behavioural changes among children (Kandel 2003).

In Albania, where migration is more frequent among men, Giannelli and Mangiavacchi (2010) find that girls are more likely than boys to be negatively affected by their fathers' departure, in terms of likelihood of dropping out and of hindered school participation. The cultural context plays a meaningful role: education-wise, girls enjoy less attention from the part of the family, in circumstances where traditionally mothers cannot assume a leading role in the household and older men from the family have higher decision-making power (Giannelli and Mangiavacchi 2010).

Wen and Lin (2012) focus on Chinese migrant families, examining children's school engagement, a composite measure to capture behavioural facets (attendance, active participation and observance of rules) and attitudinal aspects (enjoyment of homework) of school life. Their results show that the strongest negative effects on children's school engagement occur in situations where mother is the migrant parent, and the explanation is rooted in the consequences of mothers' absence on "family monitoring, cohesion and support" (Wen and Lin 2012: 126)

As described throughout this section, the effects of parental migration on children's school outcomes are complex and can be highly diverging, as multiple intervening mechanisms might mediate this relationship. In addition, the family structure prior to migration coupled with the departure scenario (i.e. which parent leaves) shapes the care arrangement in which children are embedded. This aspect can also be consequential for children's' academic evolution. Figure 1 – constructed on the basis of the literature reviewed in this section – provides a summary of the arguments described above.

Figure 1. *A summary of potential effects of parental migration on children's school outcomes, based on the cited literature*
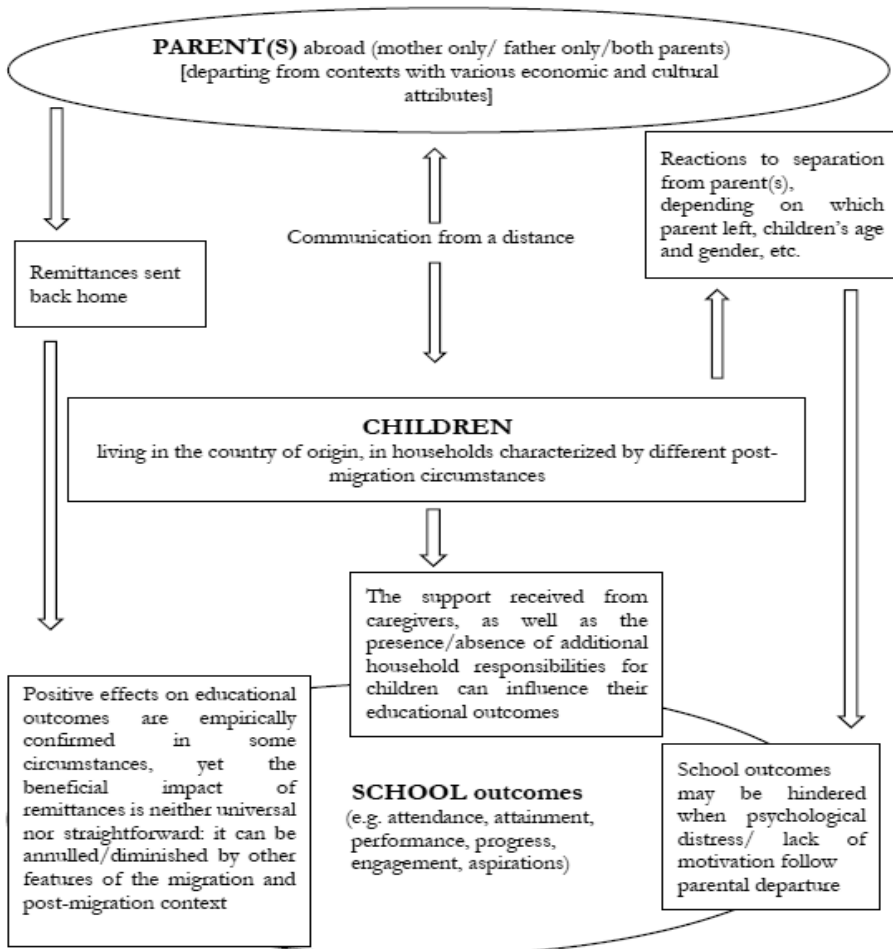
4. Data and method

The field work carried in the CASTLE project, on which this paper draws, consists to date of semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions, conducted both online and onsite, during 2021 and 2022. Several categories of respondents have been covered. Accordingly, 126 interviews and 10 focus-group sessions were conducted with members of transnational families (migrant parents, parents who stayed at home, and children), and caregivers other than parents. Most individual and group interviews with members of transnational families from Moldova and Ukraine were conducted during 2021, whereas during 2022 - given the context from Ukraine - the field work covered Moldovan families only. Because the CASTLE project also entails a policy-oriented component, a particular category of respondents consisted of representatives of NGOs, and experts from relevant local and national authorities, therefore 24 interviews were conducted with respondents from Moldova, Ukraine and Romania.

In accordance with its focus, this paper is based solely on interviews with members of Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families, both adults and children. Recollections from children's grandparents/caregivers other than parents have been left aside, because it was important to capture how parents themselves assess their children's school trajectory and how they think of their own parental role exercised from a distance. However, not all interviews with family members could be an eligible empirical source for this paper. In some families, children were still below school-age, deeming the issue of educational outcomes impacted by migration irrelevant.

Summing up, the analysis used narratives collected from children left in the home countries, migrant parents and parents who stayed at home, from transnational families where children are enrolled in school, at various levels of education. The textual material has been coded manually by the author. The use of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) followed a primarily deductive logic, being guided by the research questions advanced in the paper. However, less anticipated motifs, identified in respondents' narratives were acknowledged and incorporated in the analysis.

More generally and in line with the research aims and the supporting literature, two important angles guided the organization and analysis of interview-data: (1) the caregiving arrangements, shaped by the absence of one or both parents, that children find themselves in, and (2) the perspectives from which children's school situation is assessed, delivered by three types of informants: children with one or both parents absent, migrant parents, and parents who stayed at home to care for the young ones while their spouses are

abroad. Regarding the post-migration household situations - delineated by considering which parent is absent and who cares for the children left at home - it must be noted that caregiving arrangements where no parent is present occur not only when both the mother and father are abroad, but also in circumstances of single-parent families. In these situations, children are usually looked after by grandparents, although in several cases parents' siblings (notably children's aunts) are the designated caregivers.

5. Children's school-life and parental migration - findings from the interviews

This section describes and discusses children's and parents' viewpoints on the impact that parental absence due to labour migration exerts on young ones' school-lives. The findings are grouped by the type of post-migration caregiving arrangement that children benefit from during parental absence: (1) contexts where no parent is present and (2) contexts where one of the parents looks after the children.

Irrespective of the caregiving situation in which children live, the narratives collected from respondents accommodate a number of recurrent themes, on which this section is built. Accordingly, important topics revolve around: evolution of children's school results in the aftermath of parental migration, effects of separation-related distress on school results, control and supervision by parents, caregivers' ability to be a substitute for parents during their absence, parental communication with schools, school-related topics within parent-children communication, encouragement and support from parents, perceptions of school climate, and considerations on parental migration effects on children's well-being and school performance.

While challenges faced by children and parents with regard to separation-related consequences for education are not entirely missing, it must be observed that school attendance per se does not emerge as a difficulty, irrespective of the living situation. Children continue to go to school regularly in spite of their domestic situation being transformed by parental migration. The discussion below clarifies parents' and children's adjustment to changes shaped by migration.

5.1. Children's education in caregiving arrangements where no parent is present

I begin with the context that in principle could be particularly challenging for children – when none of their parents is physically present at home. As mentioned in a previous section, the fact that children are being looked after by

caregivers other than parents does not necessarily mean both parents are abroad for work; such circumstances also occur when the family was single-parent prior to migration. In these contexts, children are typically looked after by grand-parents or other close family members.

Respondents' accounts on changes in school results as a result of parental migration are mixed, both among children and parents. Some of the young respondents firmly discard the idea that parents' departure impacted their school performance:

> *"My success at school was not affected in any way, I did well in school and I do well in school and my mom and dad praise me, nothing has changed, everything was as before."* (Boy, 14, UA)

A similar standpoint is shared by a respondent who – apart from underlining that parents' absence was not consequential for her performance – also mentions appreciatively the unconditional support received from her parents:

> *"Until now I still had good grades, I was eminent, nothing has changed. The presence of parents was not essential for my education. If I get a bad grade, they don't tell me anything at all, I'm the one who gets sadder. They are happy for my success; they always share my achievements."* (Girl, 15, MD)

Moreover, children who say that their school results are stable, emphasize the importance of their own effort, arguing that grades are the reflection of how much children themselves invest in learning:

> *"Depending on how hard you try, so are your grades…"* (Girl, 16, MD); *"I simply study, if I didn't study, no one would raise my grades."* (Girl, 14, MD)

Yet there are also instances where children noticed changes in how well they perform in school, although they tend to link such changes to different processes. For some, the relative decline is a result of increasing complexity of the content studied in school:

> *"The first 3 years it was stable, now it has decreased a bit because it is a higher level and there are slightly greater responsibilities."* (Boy, 16, MD)

In other cases, difficulties are believed to stem from lack of access to school-related advice when needed:

> *"I don't know. Probably sometimes it became harder to do something… when a question arose, there was no one to ask…"* (Boy, 17, UA)

For some children, the perceived lack of parental monitoring can lead to lower motivation and consequently to deteriorating performance. The following example is telling in this regard:

> "… *I didn't really pay much attention to school and grades didn't really interest me that much. Why do you think this happened? Because my mother used to see if I did my homework, if I got good grades, and after she left I had no one to control me."* (Girl, 13, MD)

A further cause for decline, as identified by children, is the absence of concentration, linked, as in the excerpt below, with the separation distress:

> "*I can't say that I was doing badly in school, but I didn't have that focus, my mind was always elsewhere… after my mother came home, suddenly everything changed, my learning improved a lot, even the teachers noticed the difference and asked my mother to come to school.*" (Girl, 15, MD)

Parents' perspectives outline a similar picture, with stories about clear stability of school results and reports of transitory declines, for which they also provide tentative explanations. One of migrant mothers speaks approvingly of her child's results, claiming that "*he is in the top of his class* …" (Migrant mother, MD). The same respondent mentions that she uses her own example when encouraging her child to give his best in school: "*Our parents would always see our names on the school honorary board. I tell my child: 'you must try hard too!'*". A specific situation is reported by a mother who transferred her child to the school located where the grandparents live, for they were the designated caregivers during her absence:

> "*In the village, children are different from those in the city and the environment is beneficial for him … his results are better now, because requirements in the village are a bit different than those in the city.*"
> (Migrant mother, MD)

There are also instances where performance tends to decline. Speaking about one of her children, one respondent suggests a gendered explanation for worsening results: "*We talked, and - where necessary - I intervened... But...it's a boy's life, he's a boy, a teenager. So, ups and downs*" (migrant mother, MD). Another respondent, while noticing a downward trend of performance, links this decline to the child's lack of focus, caused by separation: "*results are a little less good now, his thoughts are elsewhere…I told him 'leave your thoughts behind, don't think of me, I will come back home, you just make sure you study well!'*" (Migrant mother, MD).
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While accounts of fading performance are not frequent, parents' concerns about the lack of direct control and supervision are evident. One respondent shares her thoughts about distance impacting the way in which the child attends to homework and studying. In doing so, she also delineates a gender dimension, suggesting that for boys it is ordinary to reduce their learning effort in time:

> "…*as I am not there, by his side, he looks in his phone during homework…he's in high school, in the tenth grade, so he studies less. About the girl…she does well in school, really well, but the boy, he takes it easier now, like boys do…*" (Migrant mother, MD)

A similar concern about the lacking supervision is expressed by another migrant mother: "*It matters a lot not being home, next to them, so that they know that: 'look, mom is home and she will get upset if I do something wrong in school, if I don't study*'" (Migrant mother, MD). Concerns about insufficient monitoring also occur along with the perception that caregivers back home are overwhelmed by children's school-related tasks: "...*grandmother, grandfather, they can no longer keep the pace with all the school lessons, and there's not so much control...*" (Migrant mother, MD).

Some parents attempt to compensate for the physical absence by helping and checking their children's school tasks from a distance. Describing her daily communication with her child, one mother adds: "*Sometimes, we do homework together*" (Migrant mother, MD). Regular communication with children about school matters is mentioned often by parents and children alike:

> "*we ask them what they did during the day, if they did their homework…*" (Migrant father, MD);

> "*She [the mother] asks me how the school goes, we discuss some topics about the future, where I'm going after the 9th grade and she asks me what plans I have for the future, how I feel in general.*" (Girl, 16, MD)

Apart from steady communication with their children, parents keep track of school matters through the communication with teachers. Migrant parents mention frequently that they keep in touch with teachers, either by calling them or through online communication:

> "*I communicated with the class master from Italy and notified her that I am a single parent, and should the child have any difficulty, she should immediately let me know…*" (migrant mother, MD); "*I communicate with my children's class teachers, I am aware of their school life. I know about their behavior, about their achievements, about their needs at school,*

about their problems at school …but thank God there were none." (Migrant mother, UA)

Children too report that parents communicate regularly with teachers:

"Yes, my mother insisted on calling the class master once a month and asking for information." (Boy, 16, MD)

Moreover, parents can access information about their children using the online tools that schools provide:

 "We have an electronic agenda and parents are connected to it, they can check there, but [they do so] less often, because they trust me, so they don't check me much." (Girl, 15, MD)

The trust referred to by the previous respondent is strongly linked to the encouragement and support that parents provide to their children, from afar:

"I stress a lot about school now because there are a lot of Olympiads [school competitions]. It's a lot of responsibility and they try to help me, support me through online communication." (Girl, 15, MD)

Parental reassurance is offered also in moments of uncertainty that children are confronted with at times:

"My parents always told me they [first] worked, and then they studied, [that] I have to study and then work…I'm in high school, and I want to quit, but my mother [says] no, no, we worked for you, you have to stay there and face it." (Girl, 17, MD)

In other instances, parents appreciate their children's autonomy in learning:

"They do their homework by themselves, the older girl helps the boy with his, because by now she manages on her own with homework." (migrant father, MD)

While attendance, grades and the overall performance are important facets, further aspects are entailed in the children's school experience. The quality of interactions with peers and teachers define the type of school climate where children may thrive or feel intimidated. Asked whether she was a target of bullying from the part of her colleagues, one of the respondents recalls:

"They understood that parents are gone and that I am sadder. I wasn't bullied, maybe on the contrary, they made me happier, there was support from them." (Girl, 15, MD)

Another respondent refers to teachers' accommodating attitudes:

"the first 4 years of primary school I spent in another school, I transferred to another school, already when my mother was away, and even if the teachers knew this detail it was not a problem … they always respected me." (Boy, 16, MD)

In their turn, parents also assert that migration did not alter the school climate for their children:

"Friendly classes have not changed … children are friends, communicate and play. Our departure did not affect in any way…" (Migrant mother, UA)

For most children, parental labour migration is not an experience they know not just because it occurred in their own family, it is a phenomenon they encounter often in their school contexts, where many colleagues face the same domestic situation. Consequently, children, teenagers in particular, can be very perceptive observers, and provide insightful opinions on the link between migration and education. The three teenagers whose views are illustrated below refer – in extraordinarily mature ways - to resilience and individual responsibility in relation to school results, perfectionism and the misconceptions that deterministically link parental migration with school neglect.

"…a student who wants to learn…finds a little time, or more time… There are cases when parents are away and children do all the work at home…but if a student has the will, despite all shortcomings, she still studies and moves on… [whether] parents are next to them or away, if they [children] do not have the will…they won't succeed." (Boy, 16, MD)

"I have noticed that children whose parents have gone abroad are children who get involved in everything, they are the kind of children who are always first at school, at sports… [maybe they think that] 'my parents are gone for me, that they work for me and you have to keep showing that you try." (Girl, 17, MD)

"I think that everyone's upbringing is different. I know people [children] who had their parents at home and did not come to school for months." (Girl, 15, MD)

5.2. Children's education in situations where one of the parents is the caregiver

This subsection shifts the attention towards children who are looked after by one of their parents, during the absence of the remaining parent. In addition to children's narratives, the analysis incorporates perspectives from both migrant parents and parents who are children's caregivers back home.

I begin with the insights offered by children in relation to perceived changes of their school results. The dominant perspective provided by children affirms the steadiness of school performance, irrespective of whether mothers or fathers are temporarily away. One of the respondent eloquently describes:

> "*I go to school regularly, I don't miss classes, I keep up with my studies, I try to stay out of trouble and have appropriate behaviour and attend classes regularly without being absent … My mother's departure did not have a negative influence on my school success.*" (Girl, MD, 14, mother abroad)

A further respondent – while arguing that school results did not change added: "*I tried to be polite at school, so my father and mother would not have problems with teachers. I managed*" (Girl, 17, UA, father abroad).

In some answers, mentions of distribution of parental roles in relation to school are apparent; asked whether after father's departure her grades have changed, a respondent explains: "*No, my mother is more likely to be responsible for this, for grades*" (Girl, 14, UA, father abroad). Similarly, one respondent affirms the constancy of his results, while explaining that: "*… my mother was there and my mother put me to work*" (Boy, 15, MD, father abroad).

Other children too, while firmly arguing that school results are unchanged, provide details about how they adjusted to the context created by their parents' departure. One respondent refers to keeping her father informed about her achievements: "*Nothing was affected, at the Olympiad I took second place in mathematics, I told him and he was very happy, he was happy for me.*" (Girl, 11, UA, father abroad) Another respondent stresses the gains in autonomy in the context of temporary separation: "*[the departure] did not affect it at all… Even when my mother was away for a period… I became more independent then, I did my homework*" (Girl, 13, UA, father abroad).

Asked if her school success has been affected by father's departure, one respondent highlights her struggle with low self-confidence:

> "*Success may not be [affected], but self-esteem yes. I have low self-esteem ... the ability to stand up for myself ... [there] should be a father [around], to help. I do not have that.*" (Girl, 13, UA, father abroad)

Another respondent speaks of school results staying the same, yet mentions changes in his approach towards homework; he associates these changes not to parental migration, but to moving up to a higher grade and an increased selectivity in assessing his tasks:

> *"I do less homework. This is most likely due to the fact that I just moved to the 8th grade and because there are already some such lessons that I consider useless, so I don't do my homework on them. But when homework is easy or interesting or mandatory, then I write it."* (Boy, 14, UA, mother abroad)

One of the children recalls a transitory decline in his performance after his father's departure; however, the situation came back to normal once he got used to the new domestic context: *"Almost nothing has changed, in the beginning I started to learn worse, but after I got used to it, I was still learning just as well"* (Boy, 14, MD, father abroad). The link between performance and separation-related distress is referred to by a further respondent, who notices that fluctuations in her motivation are related to mother's presence:

> *"…I think there is a small difference, a very small difference. Maybe not the grades, but I have more motivation and I prepare much better when my mother is at home; she doesn't help me with my homework, just the fact that she's home..."* (Girl, 15, MD, mother abroad)

As far as parents are concerned, most of them offer confident accounts in relation to their children's school outcomes. Several parents provide laudatory remarks on their children's results:

> *"… our daughter studies excellently...."* (Mother at home, UA);

> *"She studies well from the beginning…she is steady… She is one of the first in her class … I am really very pleased."* (Migrant father, MD)

Asked whether there have been changes in school grades during father's absence, one of the mothers explains: *"No, because I support him permanently with his homework. I see no differences…"* (Mother at home, MD). Mothers' critical role in supervising children's school tasks is also pointed out by one of the fathers:

> *"…my wife manages [the situation] at home, and she is strict from an educational point of view, and I see that he finished the last semester with a GPA of 9.3. And I would say that 9.3 is a very good GPA ..."* (Migrant father, MD)

One of the parents, while confirming the stability of school outcomes, believes that migration augments the amount of effort for parents who remained at home:

> "*The only thing is…that probably when two parents are at home it is a little easier to help the child in learning, because there is, say, more time for it…*" (Migrant father, UA)

In some instances, parents seek to ensure that school results are not affected by departure by taking additional measures:

> "*When I was home, I did homework with her… after I left, I talked to the teacher and she stays after the classes, like in the group. I also pay for private tutoring...*" (Migrant mother, MD)

Occasionally, parents are notified by teachers about children's unsatisfactory results. A migrant mother recalls:

> "*There were some problems, I called the principal and she told me that [child's name] is coming to school with his homework unprepared. … and then we took moral measures...*" (Migrant mother, MD)

Communication with school and teachers is thus important and parents - both those abroad and those back home - appear to be aware of this. The descriptions below, provided by two mothers, illustrate this matter.

> "*I have good relations with class teachers there, there are very good teachers, school - I'm not complaining…*" (Migrant mother, UA)

> "*... if there are any problems, I know where to go. Well, so far there have been no problems…We had a very good class master... she always responded if we needed any help, she never refused, she is strict but fair, we always had everything under control.*" (Mother at home, UA)

For parents, a specific means for keeping in touch with teachers is the attendance of school meetings. This aspect stands out as particularly telling in relation to gender-based parental involvement in children's school life. That mothers are predominantly the ones to perform this role is emphasized by parents and children alike. Asked which of the parents usually goes to school meetings, one respondent explains:

> "*Mom, but when mom is away, grandma goes. Dad doesn't really go to school. For most colleagues, the mothers come to the meeting… I think it's always been given that mothers are much more caring, and put children first…*" (Girl, 15, MD, mother abroad)

Another child tells a similar story:

> "*Parent meetings ... in general, it used to be that it was always mom. But now … dad will need to go. Dad sometimes went to parent-teacher meetings, but mostly mom went (especially in elementary school).*" (boy, 14, UA, mother abroad)

Lastly, a father's account on the matter highlights the same phenomenon:

> "*I went to school several times, when the children were small. The rest is wife's responsibility. Mostly moms go to parent meetings, I went once, and I was among women, it was a little difficult …*" (Migrant father, UA)

The fact that inputs in children's school life depends on parent's gender further emerges in relation to monitoring children's homework and progress. One respondent straightforwardly explains: "*…It is only wife's responsibility ... it was only her merit that the child had good results...*", while also adding: "*I go to parent meetings, I am a very good father, I am also interested in all the successes of the child…*" (Migrant father, UA). From a different perspective, the unbalanced distribution of tasks between parents is underlined by a mother who looks after children back home: "*He never helped them with school, he worked, and I helped with school. Nothing has changed here...*" (Mother at home, UA)

However, mothers who work abroad acknowledge fathers' efforts to secure a smooth progression of their children's school life: "*He understands that children have to learn*" (Migrant mother, UA). Participation in activities organized in school is one of the tasks that cannot be performed from a distance, therefore fathers' cooperation is essential: "*The husband went to meetings, to matinees, even for March 8th [school event], he really went, he had no choice…*" (Migrant mother, MD). Although she could rely on her husband's support, the same respondent adds that she maintained the communication with the school from a distance: "*… I was in the group with the classes, I was aware of what was going on.*"

A further challenge for migrant mothers is related to the limited ability to supervise their children's school tasks, from a distance:

> "*It's one thing when you're next to them, you open their notebooks, diaries, see their notes, ask what homework they have… you supervise them, you see them every day...*" (Migrant mother, MD)

As a result, mothers attempt to overcome the helplessness that physical distance creates by calling their children to make sure they fulfilled their school tasks. One mother describes:

> *"I find it more difficult with school, to control them, because you have to support them … I call them and check their homework..."* (Migrant mother, MD)

Communication with children is thus of paramount importance and it helps mothers regain the confidence that children follow their normal course: "*…my relationship with them was permanent, I was with them, but not physically. I knew when they left for school, when they came from school...*" (Migrant mother, MD). Fathers too communicate with their children about school matters, inquiring about "*the relations with [his] classmates, teachers, results…*" (Migrant father, MD). Fathers underline the interaction limits driven by distance, while also being cognizant of mothers' crucial role for children's' education:

> *"… I'm talking [with the daughters] from a distance, the wife - because she's at home and she's with them, she constantly makes them read, do their homework ...*" (Migrant father, MD)

In their turn, children are glad to receive guidance from their fathers: "*… he helps me, advises me, calms me down …*" (Girl, 16, MD, father abroad)

Parents encourage their children to study, albeit in different styles. One respondent describes his manner of providing encouragement as follows: "*I'm trying to tell her [the daughter] ... I say... 'I ask you, study!'*" (Migrant father, UA). A different approach is used by a mother in whose address the idea of self-sacrifice emerges: "*I told them like this: 'You will have to study. I work for you. I make this money for you. I invest all my money in your studies!*" (Migrant mother, MD)

Apart from parents asking children to study in general, their inputs are also important in specific situations, when the young ones need a boost in their confidence:

> *"…there are times when I don't get good grades … for example, it happened once that I got a 4, and she said to me like this: 'calm down, next time you will do much better than now'."* (Girl, 16, MD, mother abroad)

The importance of parental support is a recurrent theme in children's narratives. Referring to the impact that parental migration has on children's education in general, one young respondent provides the following explanation:

> *"I think when parents are away, children don't do so well in school because … I know that when some children go home and no one asks them about their grades … It's different when your parent supports you,*

> *being by your side, to tell you that you need [to try] more.*" (Girl, 15, MD, father abroad)

Another respondent underlines the different impact that mother's or father's departure can have on children's discipline:

> "*If the father left and the mother stayed, perhaps she does not have such a strong influence on the child, and cannot properly raise him, the child can be rude to the teacher.*" (Girl, 17, UA, father abroad)

A similar perspective is offered by a mother who stresses the difference between mothers' and fathers' ability to act as a disciplinarian parent:

> "*… raising children without a father is problematic for him [the child], because he does not know … about a father's authority ... I educate them like girls ... I can be firm, but not really ...*" (Mother at home, MD)

Lastly, children speak about potential vulnerabilities emerging from parental migration in relation to the school climate. One of the Moldovan respondents, who studies in Romania appreciates teachers' supportive attitude in both countries where she studied:

> "*… teachers behave normally, even if mother or father is abroad, they behave the same. And in Moldova it was the same, there were even some teachers who supported me morally…'your mother is gone, everything will be fine, she will come back'.*" (Girl, 16, mother abroad)

However, even if they were not themselves the targets, children refer to situations of bullying at the expense of peers with migrant parents in the classroom context:

> "*… those who have their parents at home can afford to offend those whose parents are away. I had such a situation in my class, it wasn't me, someone else was involved, but I still didn't like it.*" (Girl, 16, MD, father abroad)

5.3. A note on the place of education in children's plans for future

Irrespective of the caregiving arrangement, many children started to think of plans for their future, some of which involve moving or studying abroad. For instance, a respondent who lives with his grandparents speaks of the perspective of studying abroad:

> "*I think I would very much like to study abroad, there are more opportunities for me there … We talk about it often and my mother wants me to study abroad.*" (Boy, 14, UA)

Another respondent whose both parents are away refers to her wish to explore opportunities abroad, while at the same time being conflicted by the desire to live in her home country:

> "*I started learning more, especially studying languages, because I realized that I, too, want to leave because I don't see opportunities here. I want to be with my parents, I want to develop further... I always wanted to live in Moldova. I realize that it is difficult and I should do my studies abroad. But if everything goes well, I would be happy to return.*" (Girl, 15, MD)

Coming from a family where the father is the absent parent, a teenager explains: "

> *Now I'm in the 9th grade and I'm finishing the 9th grade and I thought of going not so far, to a country where he [the father] was, but to Romania, closer; maybe I'll finish high school there, after that I'll see what I do, and also, maybe I want to live abroad.*" (Girl, 16, MD, father abroad)

Lastly, one respondent stresses the importance of education, while believing that in families with parental migration, children internalize the idea that going abroad is the course to be followed:

> "*Education matters most. I think that a child who grows up with a parent abroad already has the idea of not staying in the country. What can he hope for?*" (Boy, 17, MD, father abroad)

6. Discussion

By involving the temporary absence of one or both parents, labor migration can complicate the circumstances that enable children to follow a straightforward school trajectory.

In the narratives analysed in this study, steadiness of school performance emerges as the prevailing description outlined by children and parents alike. Many parents declare themselves satisfied with their children's school results and appreciate their perseverance. The stability of results is enabled, according to some respondents, by children's own effort and diligence, while other informants stress parental monitoring and assistance as determining factors. However, declining results are also reported, both in contexts where children live without both their parents and in those where one parent stayed at home. What the two contexts seem to share above all is the fact that separation-related distress (resulting in children's decreased focus and motivation) can act as cause for declining performance. Children looked after by caregivers other than parents also link their school difficulties with the

absence of parental monitoring of school tasks and with not having someone to ask questions when needed. The intrinsic specificity of caregiving arrangements where no parent is present generates particular concerns about monitoring for parents, who attempt to compensate their physical absence through regular communication with their children and with children's teachers. In contrast, supervision of children fulfilling their school-tasks and contact with schools are less challenging for families where one parent stayed at home.

As children spend a significant part of their time in the school context, the quality of the classroom climate – involving their interactions with teachers and peers – is a relevant facet of their experience. Parental migration could be consequential in this regard to the extent that children are exposed to prejudiced attitudes from other students or from teachers. The interviews analysed in this study suggest that for the most part, children attend securing classroom environments, with supportive teachers and peers. However, as illustrated in the empirical section, children are aware that instances of bullying or prejudiced thinking towards children with migrant parents do exist and speak disapprovingly of such incidents.

A further aspect that emerges from respondents' recollections refers to the gender-based distribution of parental roles. Mothers stand out as the primary performers of multiple types of educational involvement: keeping track of children's school progress, assisting with homework, attending meetings organized in school. While these are framed by respondents as *de facto* roles that mothers fulfil in relation to their children, gender-based delineations are also referred to from the perspective of normative expectations. Thus, fathers' departure is believed to have a potentially detrimental effect on children's discipline, for mothers are expected – by children and adults alike – to be less able to act as an effective authority figure. Conversely, representations of mother-figures tend to emphasize the nurturing qualities in relation to their children. However, one can retrieve in children's recollections references to fathers being an important source of encouragement and praise, as well as instances where father's absence is perceived to affect children's self-esteem. In their turn, migrant mothers, while attempting to stay involved from afar in their children's school-lives, acknowledge fathers' efforts back home to fulfil their duties in relation to youngsters' education.

Parent-child communication from a distance can hardly be a substitute for physical co-presence and sometimes it is selective and non-transparent (Ducu et al. 2023). However, as outlined by the respondents in this study, during the intervals of separation, digital and phone communication between children and the absent parents is an important mechanism by which parents

stay updated about school developments and challenges, while also being for them the only available way to assist, monitor and encourage their children. In view of the established link between parental encouragement and children's motivation for learning (Ginsburg and Bronstein 1993), children's recurrent reports of receiving support and positive feedback from their migrant parents are a reassuring finding.

As with all qualitative endeavours, the extent to which these findings can be considered representative for the wider population is seriously limited. It is possible (and highly plausible) that many transnational families originating from the two countries share attributes less conducive to favourable environments for their children. Parents' ability to remit regularly and to cultivate an open and supportive communication with their children, the living conditions back home and the securing nature of the caregiving arrangement that children benefit from can be very different from one instance to another. Even in the absence of migration, the intensity and regularity of parental involvement in children's education (support, supervision, communication with schools) and the gender-based distribution of school-related responsibilities among parents are aspects that generate notable variation between families (Hill and Taylor 2004; Kim and Hill 2015; Kim 2018). In this sense, it is useful to bear in mind that "[t]ransnational families are as diverse as geographically proximate families" (Baldassar et al. 2014: 171).

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Specific Needs of Children Left Behind by Labour Migration in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract: During the past 25 years, international labour migration from the Republic of Moldova has reached unimaginable levels. Although it generated several positive effects, it also produced new social risks, including the expansion of the number of transnational families. For the Republic of Moldova, the phenomenon of transnational families has become a social risk, as it has led to various demographic imbalances, as well as the problem of children left without care following migration. The purpose of this article is to analyse the situation of children left without care as a result of labour migration, as well as to highlight the specific problems and needs of this social group.

Keywords: migration, labour migration of parents, transnational families, children left behind.

1. Introduction

International labour migration from the Republic of Moldova, which registered a new intensification after the COVID-19 pandemic, caused new phenomena generating social risks, including the expansion of the number of transnational families.

It should be noted that during the last years international labour migration from the Republic of Moldova has reached an impressive level. According to the Labour Force Survey, in 2022 the number of people who went abroad for a period of up to one year in search of a job was about 93 thousand people or about 7.5% of the population outside the labour force of 15 years and over[1] (NBS 2022).

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[1]From 2019, the Labor Force Survey defines temporary international labor migrants as only those people who are abroad for only 12 months. For this reason, the number of temporary

However, the cumulative number of labour migrants in the last 25 years from the Republic of Moldova is much higher. Various studies estimate the extent of labour migration from the Republic of Moldova from 400 thousand (Zwager and Sințov 2014) to over one million people. As an indirect source, relevant for estimating the extent of migration, the data of the last Population Census of the Republic of Moldova, held in 2014, which recorded a drastic decrease in the number of the population due to international labour migration, can also be considered. According to the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Moldova, over a decade from 2004 to 2014, the population witnessed a decline caused by labour migration, from 3.3 million people to 2.6 million people (NBS 2022). On January 1, 2023, the population of the Republic of Moldova was 2.5128 million people. It should be noted that mainly people from rural areas are leaving, they constitute 70.5% of all labour migrants (NBS 2022).

For the Republic of Moldova, international labour migration can be considered, in general, a beneficial phenomenon that has ensured a perspective of sustainable development. It contributed to the increase of incomes and the well-being of the population, to the reduction of the poverty level, while the foreign exchange resources entered into the country from abroad ensured economic growth, stability of the national currency, as well as a change in the consumption pattern of the population, characteristic of a standard of better life.

However, international labour migration from the Republic of Moldova has also produced new phenomena generating social risks, including the expansion of the number of transnational families. Currently, in the context of globalization processes and the increase in the scale of migration, the phenomenon of transnational families is becoming a common global tendency, characteristic of practically any country, which does not necessarily cause serious social risks.

However, for the Republic of Moldova this phenomenon has become a negative one, which has led to demographic imbalances (accelerated ageing of the population[2]), to the increase in divorce, and to the decrease in the birth rate[3], as well as to the problem of children left without care following the migration of the work-age.

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labor migrants decreased to 93 thousand people. The rest of the people are considered permanently migrated (National Bureau of Statistics 2022).

[2] According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, on January 1, 2023, the population-aging rate reached a record level of 23.8%.

[3] During 2022, only 26,952 children were born in the Republic of Moldova, compared to 40,709 in 2014.

The expansion of the number of transnational families caused by labour migration, as well as the problem of children left without care, constitute real challenges for social cohesion at the community level, as well as for the sustainability of the family institution in the Republic of Moldova. It should be noted that migration affects, first of all, the family balance, which has a strong impact on the psycho-emotional balance of children, husbands or wives who have gone abroad to support themselves and their families, as well as husbands and wives who remain home.

The phenomenon of transnational families and the problem of children left behind by labour migration are already known in the Republic of Moldova since the beginning of the 2000s, when international labour migration registered a strong intensification. During that period, civil society, the mass media, international organizations concerned with the issue of child protection and the phenomenon of migration alerted society and public authorities, indicating the consequences and social risks that these phenomena can generate. Several researches and studies were initiated, as a result of which the public authorities developed various policies and intervention tools in the field. Policy documents were also developed in the field, such as the Child Protection Strategy for the years 2014-2020 (Decision of the Government No. 434 of 10-06-2014). The normative framework was perfected by the launch of Law no. 140 of 14.06.2013 "Regarding the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents" (Law no. 140 of 14.06.2013), several social services provided at community level by social workers were developed, school psychologists or social pedagogues, civil society representatives, etc.

The most effective management of the problem of children left without care as a result of labour migration becomes increasingly important as international labour migration, respectively, the expansion of transnational families becomes more and more extensive.

Currently, due to the fact that the issue has become so acute, central and local public authorities have started to implement a practice of monitoring children separated from their parents following migration. Thus, at the end of 2022 according to the CER-103 survey (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2022), managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the total number of cases of children separated from their parents both of whose parents or whose only parent[4] is temporarily in another locality in the country or abroad constituted 28570 people, of which 21210 children from the rural environment, and 7360 children from the urban environment. It should

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[4] The situation is taken into account when the only parent in a single-parent family is away, and the child is left in the care of someone else (relatives, neighbours, friends, grandparents).

be noted that among children separated from their parents, 1481 were aged up to 2 years old, 5579 were aged between 3 and 6 years, while 17025 were aged between 7 and 15 years. The remaining 4484 children were placed between the 16-17 years old age bracket. Custody was instituted for 12,801 children.

The data of the CER-103 survey show that in recent years there has been a modest but stable decrease of this social group at risk, a fact determined by the transition of migration from the Republic of Moldova to a new phase of maturity, which provides, among other things, that parents go to work abroad with their family and children.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the situation of children left behind by labour migration, highlighting the challenges they face, as well as the specific needs of this social group. Also, the normative framework regarding guardianship, conservatorship and custody as an official and unofficial measure for the protection of children separated from their parents, the attitude of social actors (local public administration, social workers, civil society, etc.) towards the practices is also reviewed.

The article comes with a series of conclusions and recommendations regarding meeting the needs of children left behind by migration and minimizing the negative effects of the issue.

2. Methodology
In the elaboration of the article and the analysis of the specific needs of the children left behind after migration from the Republic of Moldova, various quantitative and qualitative research methods were used, including the analysis of statistical data taken from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection; additionally, data from various studies carried out in recent years was taken into consideration. Policy documents and normative acts were analysed and observation, in-depth sociological interview, focus group, etc. were used.

This article is based on the analysis of the opinions of children whose parents are abroad, of parents in labour migration, as well as of spouses who remained at home. These opinions were collected during the in-depth interviews, focus groups carried out within the CASTLE[5] research project. It focuses, first of all, on issues such as the children's attitude towards the parents' migration, the child's acceptance of the caregiver following the formalization of the custody, the frequency of the children's communication with the parents, the frequency of the parents' periodic return home from migration, the state of health, the

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[5]Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the, Contract number: ICMPD/2021/MPF-357-004.

physical, social and emotional needs they face, as well as parents' attitudes towards meeting the needs of children left without care after migration. The results of 36 in-depth interviews with adults, parents who migrated for work or stayed at home, as well as caregivers were analysed. 4 interviews were conducted with children left behind after migration, and 4 focus groups were subsequently conducted with these children and parents. Also, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of central and local public authorities.

The research tools (interview guides) were coordinated with colleagues from Babeş-Bolyai University, partners in the CASTLE project and adapted to the realities of the Republic of Moldova. In the framework of the research, the relative observance of a territorial representativeness was followed.

3. Children left behind by labour migration. Results of research in Republic of Moldova

In the preparation of the article, a vast literature in the field was analysed, , comprising studies, monographs, articles, normative acts, official data from government institutions concerned with the social protection of children whose parents are working abroad from the Republic of Moldova. Studies of various international organizations such as UNICEF, IOM, ILO, non-governmental organizations, etc. were also analysed.

Among these studies, the UNICEF study "The situation of children left without parental care following migration" can be mentioned (UNICEF 2006). It should be noted that this is one of the first studies focusing on the problem of children left without care following labour migration. The study aimed to investigate the situation of children both of whose parents (or whose single parent) work abroad. The research approached the phenomenon of adult migration from a predominantly qualitative perspective, focusing on the analysis of the impact that separation from parents has on the emotional and social development of children.

Another study, developed at the initiative of the IOM, is "The specific needs of children and the elderly left without the care of family members who have gone to work abroad" (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011) and, which reflects the results of a qualitative sociological research, carried out in 2010. The study explains aspects of the psychological, social and economic impact of migration on children and the elderly left behind by migrant family members.

At the initiative of UNICEF, another study focused on researching the situation of transnational families and children left behind by labour migration was developed: "Children left without parental care. Evaluation of official and

unofficial guardianship within the child care and protection system in the Republic of Moldova"(UNICEF 2015). The study aimed to come up with certain recommendations for improving the normative framework, relevant policies, procedures and practices, regarding the custody institution as an element of child care and protection.

4. The analysis of the specific needs of children left behind by labour migration

One of the most discussed social risks generated by international labour migration from the Republic of Moldova in recent years represents the expansion of transnational families and the situation of children left without care as a result of migration. As such, the emphasis should be placed on the consequences of migration can cause on those who remain at home. Parental labour migration can produce a multitude of negative effects on children left at home. Migration influences the emotional states of family life, directly affecting the development of children's personality, as well as the physical and mental health of all family members.

Migration strongly influences the psycho-emotional development of children and their socialization (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011). The tense psycho-emotional state that children left without care go through generates states of decompensation of the body which facilitate the development of organic disorders and diseases, while the increased volume of responsibilities causes mental and physical overwork, and as a result, various pathologies appear, etc. Parents' migration affects children's diet and nutritional balance. Children are fed insufficiently and incorrectly, a fact that leaves its mark on possible illnesses (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011). The absence of parents from the family leads to an acute lack of attachment, affection for the child, who has no one to ask for help, guidance, which causes problems in the formation of the child's personality.

The lack of attachment and the functioning of a family model will later be felt in the families that these children will create, deprived of parental love and warmth, through the prism of the responsibilities that the parents had towards them. The psychological impact of parents' migration on children is characterized by the feeling of loneliness, lack of affectivity, emotional deprivation, these being accompanied by early maturation, anxiety and fear of parents potentially divorcing (Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011).

On the other hand, adults who went to work abroad, not out of pleasure, but out of the need to provide their families with a decent living, also feeling a sense of guilt towards their children, feeling that they were not with

them at critical moments. The main reasons that made them go to work abroad, cited by the majority of parents in the research, were: lack of jobs; the too low salary, with which they could not even cover the most necessary expenses; the desire to have a better life for oneself, but especially for the children. These reasons are found in the accounts of most of the adults interviewed:

> *"I left, because in our country you don't make the money you need... to support the family and the children are growing up... you can't support the family with the salaries we have in Moldova"* (IA_migrant parent_10);

> *"Because we didn't have anything to support the children, because here in Moldova the salary is low and... here we have 2-3 thousand lei, yes, 2-3 thousand doesn't buy you, only the monthly utilities and food. And you can't buy anything more."* (IA_migrant parent_27).

Parents' absence_even for a short period, is difficult for children to bear. Leaving for a longer period means increased difficulties. The research showed that the perception of migration and the children's attitude towards the parents' migration is largely determined by the age at which the child was left with a single parent or in the custody of others (relatives, friends, grandparents). An important role is also played by who left (mother, father or both parents), the period of migration, etc. The mother's departure is felt more painfully by small children:

> *"I was used to dad going, bringing a backpack of chocolates and me being the happiest person in the whole world, but when mom left too I felt a break."* (FGD_1_child).

The situation becomes more complicated in the case of single-parent families when the only parent has to leave.

The CASTLE research showed that, in most cases, children's opinion regarding their parents' migration was not sought:

> *"honestly, they didn't ask us who we want to stay with."* (FGD_2_child).

> *"they left me with strangers. They are my grandparents, but I practically did not know them. Money stole my childhood, sometimes I regret it, sometimes I'm glad".* (FGD_1_child).

The parents did not inform their children about their departure abroad because of the children's young age. When the children asked about leaving, the parents' answer was not the most honest:

> *"I'm going to run and come back quickly", "I'm coming."* (FGD_1_ child)

As a result, some children felt, in a way, lied to, betrayed by their parents:

> *"I was 11 years old, I was little. Now I'm 15. Then I was angry with them because they lied to me."* (FGD_1_child).

For this reason, the opinions of children left behind after migration about their parents' departure, as a rule, are not positive:

> *"I don't have a very good opinion about my mother leaving because it's hard without her and I want to have her by my side... I don't have a very good opinion because children need parents by their side. The father's presence in my life is very important. I need support and I want to always have him by my side."* (IIA_4_child)

> *"I think it's very bad that the parents leave, because the children don't have enough support, especially during adolescence."* (IIA_6_child).

Children left behind by migration did not appreciate the benefits obtained from their parents' migration. When asked about these benefits, many stated that they were of little importance:

> *"there are no benefits, only the fact that the material situation compared to 5 years ago has increased."* (IIA_6_child).

However, in many cases, parents nevertheless prepared children for their departure, explaining to them the necessity of migration. In these circumstances, prior discussions with the children about the departure were welcome:

> *"My parents always prepare me morally when they leave, that I have to listen to my grandmother, that she can't always do much and we have to help her."* (FGD_1_child).

> *"I communicated to them that I was going to leave and that I was doing it for their own good."* (IA_ migrant parent_01)

Research has shown that children, however, feel the need to talk to their parents about their going abroad, so that the parents are honest, which will help them to accept the parent's departure more easily. In the situation where the parents talked with the children the causes of migration, the children tried to understand the reasons that were the basis of this decision:

"...they had to migrate to have a better life, to give their children what they want" (IIA_1_child);

"they left for money, house, food"(IIA_2_child);

"they left to provide a better life for their children" (IIA_3_child);

"parents work abroad because they can have a better salary there than in Moldova" (FGD_2_child).

However, the need for affection, understanding and guidance from family members are important conditions for children left without care, which is why migrants must make additional efforts to ensure their children live in a safe environment by finding the most suitable person as a caregiver for children left behind by migration, which the children accept, and which the parents can trust. In recent years, modern information technologies have greatly facilitated the communication of parents with their children left at home, due to which the absence of parents for children has become easier. Research has shown that children's need for communication with their parents is met practically on a daily basis:

"every day", *"we communicate quite often, depending on the time available."* (FGD_2_child).

As a rule, communication also depends on the specifics of the work of the departed parents or on the habits that have been created within the family.

"...with my mother I communicate every day, with my father every day or two because he has a more intensive work, he is always tired and when he calls me, then we talk". (FGD_1_child).

The children talk to their parents who are gone about their success at school, about their health, about the joys or problems they had during the day:

"how I feel, how school is going" (IIA_1_child);

"like here, if we are all healthy and what else is happening at home" (IIA_2_child).

At the same time, parents tell their children about their work, about the country in which they work, about the specifics of cultural traditions, etc.
"about what traditions are in Italy. He tells me what foods are there, what kind of drinks, what kind of toys and others." (IIA_5_child).

The research did not identify any strained or conflictual relationships between children and the remaining parent or carer. If the remaining parent is the

mother, trusting relationships with her are preserved, the children only feeling the lack of the father and his emotional support.

> *"I can talk about anything with my mother and she understands me."* (FGD_2_child),

In the case of the mother's departure, her absence is felt more:

> *"I get along well with my father and brother, but I don't tend to reveal myself."* (IIA_4_child).

Often, grandparents serve as the caretakers of the children left behind. The relationships between grandparents and children after the parents leave to work abroad can be different. They can be very good or more tense.

> *"...The relationship with my grandmother is very close, I feel more at ease with her and she knows me better I would say."* (IIA_1_child)

> *"the grandparents are older, they are from period of communism that influenced them and you can tell that they think differently about things, and if you tell them something new, they still don't understand."* (FGD_2_child);

> *"we have the impression that they don't understand us, and they have the impression that we don't understand them, and this is difficult."* (FGD_1_child)

Relationships with peers play a significant part in the development of the personality of children left behind by migration. There are many cases when these children isolate themselves, become more shy, do not establish friendly relations with their peers either because they are not understood or because of lack of free time, etc. The communication of these children usually boils down to discussions with teachers, psychologists. Children face certain difficulties in integrating into different social groups due to either the lack of a communication model of the parents with other people, or due to the closure itself, or due to an aggressive reaction as a form of defence:

> *"For example, I noticed in the case of the boy that he became a little more withdrawn, quieter. But even now, he is thirty-one years old, I think that the time since then has affected him, it has affected him, because as I said, he is more withdrawn, quieter, more... he doesn't really communicate, he is not like other children ..."* (FG_adult_01)

> *"...children left in someone else's care stand out through scandalous behaviour. It's not their fault, they just don't understand the situation, and*

parents, often feeling guilty, compensate for their lack with money. Here, children get out of control and acquire bad behaviours." (IA_stay-at-home parent_01).

The departure of parents abroad led to the appearance of new concerns for the children left at home. Housework that was previously performed by mother or father is taken over by the children. Both girls and boys reported changes in their daily routine, including new household responsibilities:

> *"I take care of the house and household"* (IIA_3_child);

> *"now I do my mother's chores every day"* (IIA_4_child);

> *"some duties that my mother used to do, such as washing the dishes, cleaning around the house, have also fallen to me"* (IIA_6_child);

> *"all the personal worries are on us: we have to cook, clean, wash our clothes, take care of ourselves. Children who have parents at home, they wake them up in the morning, make them breakfast, while we are responsible for ourselves, we have to do all this."* (FGD_2_child)

The household chores under the children's responsibility also depend on the number of children remaining, as well as on which parent is absent. If the father is away, as a rule, the boys take on his responsibilities. Girls take on the duties of cooking, cleaning and looking after younger brothers/sisters:

> *"My sister took care of me since I was 3 months old because my parents went to work in Moscow and I stayed with my grandmother and my sister. All the time when she came from school, she had to feed me, make food for me, take care of me, but grandma was going to the garden to clean."* (FGD_1_child)

In rural areas, children can also be involved in agricultural activities:

> *"we have a garden and the grandparents are always away with work and I take care of the garden, and when they come, I always make food for myself and for them, that's my own responsibility."* (FGD_1_child)

The new responsibilities of children left at home following the migration of their parents often lead to a lack of time for school or entertainment:

> *"she (sister) could not do the lessons and had problems."* (FGD_1_child)

At the same time, the new bonds led children to appreciate their parents' work more:

> *"the difficulty of the situation after my mother's departure made me appreciate her work by saving and encouraging her."*(IIA_4_child)

> *"at the weekend I can go out somewhere with friends for a walk around the city, otherwise lessons, reading and extracurricular activities"* (IIA_6_child)

Few of the children left behind by migration mentioned that they have a lot of free time and:

> *"he doesn't really use it effectively"* (FGD_1_child)

Children left behind by migration may also face certain medical problems. Although access to medical services, according to existing legislation, is offered free of charge to all children, they cannot react promptly to health changes, and do not go to the doctor in time, so the risk of developing serious complications increases and can evolve to acute illness. The lack of caregivers can complicate the procedure of providing medical assistance. Thus, the research showed that the main unmet needs of children left behind by migration are mainly of a psycho-emotional and behavioural nature, and less of a material nature. Children left behind by migration rarely face problems related to their well-being. Overcoming psycho-emotional problems through the development and diversification of social and psychological services, as well as the organization of free time at the community level can really lead to overcoming possible risks related to the problem of children left behind by migration and ensure a real increase in their quality of life.

5. Adults' perception regarding the specific needs of children left behind by labour migration

Migrant parents who have gone to work abroad are not indifferent to the fate of their children left at home. They feel, in a way, stigmatized, because they were not with their children during the most important moments of their lives, and they did not contribute enough to the formation of their personality. Sometimes parents had to leave their children at home in a depressed state:

> *"...a week before I left abroad, she (daughter) could not eat. She went into depression. Later, I also went to the psychologist with her, and she has been suffering ever since."*(IA_ migrant parent_15)

Almost all parents in transnational families mentioned that when they leave, the children remain sad. At the same time, it should be noted that for parents going to work abroad, it is difficult to leave their children at home

> *"Very sad... My feeling is that I want to stay at home with the child, and work and have a normal salary, if the prices are not exorbitant in Moldova so that I can support the child and grow up, and let him see that there is a future in Moldova."*(IA_migrant parent_10)

Parents are also concerned that international labour migration separate spouses and children. They are aware of the fact that labour migration leads to the weakening of relationships between parents and children, especially when children have been left with caregivers at a very young age:

> *"She knows it's mom and she calls her mom, but you know, like in the wind. They're not close friends, no!"* (IA_ carer _06)

However, the parents' departure was not a voluntary one, it was determined by the need to ensure a decent living for their family. The reasons cited by the majority of parents in the research were: lack of employment opportunities; the too low wages, the desire to have a better life for themselves and the children. Migrant parents leave their children in someone's custody only if both parents have left. As a rule, parents, before leaving to work abroad, notify the public authorities only if the children are left at home with grandparents or caregivers:

> *"we went to the town hall, we filled out the guardianship [forms], I gave my signature, fthe children's father gave his signature, because we leave them in the care of the grandmother."* (IA_ migrant parent _12)

However, formal custody was not always established. Many migrant parents, especially from the urban environment, leave their children in the care of the caregiver only as a result of an oral agreement:

> *"Somehow I didn't even feel the necessity that, look, something needs to be done and because of the lack of powers it is not being done..."* (IA_ migrant parent_21)

Sometimes, when the children stayed at home with one of the parents, the local public authorities are not notified. In most cases, children left behind by migration stay at home with one of their parents or grandparents. However, in some cases children were left at home in the care of relatives, friends or neighbours. In general, the research showed that migrant parents are satisfied with the caregivers with whom the children were left. However, there were also cases when the chosen caretakers were not the most suitable:

> *"...there were moments when I was waiting for more..."*(IA_migrant parent_20);

> *"...I left them with a cousin of mine. Yes, she was young, she was a big girl. In the father-in-law's house. Father-in-law was here. But, the children however suffered. When it's a mother, it's a mother and when...(he cries)."*
> (IA_migrant father_15)

According to migrant parents, grandparents are the preferred caregivers:

> *"...I would advise parents to leave more in the care of grandparents, who are closer in spirit, but who no longer have other children in their care."*
> (IA_ migrant parent_20)

On the other hand, most of the caregivers participating in the research mentioned that they had no problems with the children left in their care.

The interviewed stay-at-home parents and caregivers mentioned that the children left in their care did not experience any health problems, only colds and other minor health problems. They saw no changes in children's physical health after one or both parents went to work abroad. However, according to migrant parents, separation from parents causes certain psycho-emotional traumas, especially for younger children. It happens that they remain angry with their parents because they left and they no longer want to communicate with them:

> *"...when I returned home after 3 months, he didn't even want to come to me to embrace me, I would come and take him in my arms, he would push me..."* (IA_ migrant parent_14).

Migrant parents are not indifferent to their children's school success either. The research showed that they pay special attention to maintaining the relationship with the school. In the parents' opinion, if a child's success has become weaker, one of the reasons is that he spends more time thinking about his parents and is unable to concentrate:

> *"Yes yes, her studying has changed a little bit as the teacher said, class leader, like when I was at home, her studying is weaker, her mind is focused elsewhere."* (IA_ migrant parent_27).

Regarding the need for communication and the frequency of communication of migrant parents with their children, this, according to migrant parents, has decreased. Although modern information technologies also allow more intensive communication, it proves to be more limited in other respects:

> *"we talk on social media, but it's not like you're right next to them, holding them, cuddling them and telling them how much you love them."*
> (FG_adult_02)

Parents say they communicate with their children at least once a week, but most reported communicating daily:

> *"Every day, usually in the evening, we talk with the whole family for at least an hour."* (IA_ stay-at-home parent _01)

Most often common, routine issues are discussed:

> *"We were talking about how they feel, what they ate, who upset them, how they were at school, if they were at school, if they were on vacation, have they been at grandmother and the rest of relatives."* (IA_ migrant parent_11)

The impossibility of always being near the children makes the migrant parents try to educate the children through distance communication:

> *"We were talking about studies, behaviour, the hours he should be at home, not to stop at people and foreign cars on the way, but to come straight home."* (IA_ migrant parent_03)

Besides the long-distance communication, parents also communicate with their children when they return home. Most parents say that during these short periods they try to spend as much time as possible with their children:

> *"...the boy is always with me as long as I'm at home..."* (IA_ migrant parent_08)

Labour migration has contributed to improvement of the living standard of those who left:

> *"...I managed to get an apartment in the country..."* (FG_adult_01)

With the help of the money they earned, some parents managed to take their children to the seaside on trips, to overcome some of the children's health problems of the children:

> *"When I was going abroad, I was thinking about her care, to put her teeth brackets, it takes a lot of money, and little by little, it was done..."* (IA_ migrant parent _07).

Solving material problems also improves relations between spouses, which proves beneficial for all family members:

> *"In any case, our financial situation has improved ... I'm not saying that we are ... yes, we are still ... but there is some stability. This financial stability calms the "climate" in the family...as one might say..."* (IA_ migrant parent_26).

The research showed that the local community (local public authorities, civil society) does not really intervene and is not very interested in transnational families, in the children left behind by migration. Stay-at-home parents or caregivers mentioned that usually only close relatives come with any moral support or advice in these children's lives. Society's attitude towards transnational families and children left at home can sometimes be harsh and influenced by certain prejudices:

> *"...society has a contradictory attitude towards these families - many believe that if someone from the family is gone, the family is well provided for in all points of view"* (IA_migrant parent_01).

However, the public authorities of the Republic of Moldova are aware of the seriousness of the situation and react promptly to the various forms of manifestation of the problem of transnational families and children left without care as a result of labour migration either by improving the legal framework or by developing new public policies and social services for this category of people. At the local level, the local public authorities are making great efforts to deal with the situation created in order to avoid the risks related to the problem of transnational families. In this context, effective communication with potential migrant parents is ensured:

> *"At the community level, social workers sensitize all parents who are going to work abroad. Parents are invited to the town hall to inform them about any problems that may arise."* (Social worker, Filipeni town hall).

Once the issue of transnational families and children left behind after migration has become so acute, there has been a need to adapt the policies and legal framework to effectively overcome this issue. Law no. 140 of 14.06.2013 "Regarding the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents" came with clear measures to protect children left behind by migration through the mandatory establishment of tutelage and guardianship. It should be noted that the representatives of local public authorities believe that this normative framework allows them to effectively exercise their functions vis-a-vis the situation of transnational families and children left behind by migration.

In 2020, Law No. 112 of 09-07-2020 "For the modification of some normative acts" (Law 112 of 09-07-2020), which provides for a more simplified mechanism for establishing custody for children left behind by labour migration instead of tutelage or guardianship, which indicates that the permanent legislative framework is being perfected and responds promptly to the challenges related to the issue of transnational families.

Therefore, it can be concluded that adults, whether they are migrants or caregivers, perceive equally well the problems and needs of children left behind by migration. As far as possible, they intervene promptly in overcoming these problems. In the situation where they are not able to overcome them, they turn to the representatives of the public authorities. Likewise, the public authorities are aware of the seriousness of the situation and react to the various forms of manifestation of the problem of children left without care as a result of labour migration, either by developing new public policies and social services appropriate to the new challenges that have arisen, or by cooperating as closely as possible with representatives of civil society, with the local population, contributing to the organization of various volunteer initiatives.

6. Conclusions

Although international labour migration from the Republic of Moldova had a fairly beneficial impact on increasing the population's well-being and combating poverty, it also generated certain social risks, including the expansion of the number of transnational families and the problem of children left without care as a result of migration .

The most widespread problems and needs related to the issue of children left behind by labour migration are not so much material, but social and behavioural, such as children's self-isolation, the feeling of loneliness, anxiety, emotional deprivation, etc.

The central and local public authorities in the Republic of Moldova are aware of the risks of international labour migration and try to react promptly to overcome them, either by adapting the regulatory framework, by promoting coherent and efficient public policies, or by developing new social services intended for social groups affected by migration. In the situation where the public authorities do not deal with the new problems and needs related to children left behind by migration, the following are welcome:

- The development at local level, especially in rural localities, of qualified psychological services for children left behind by migration. These services can be provided, including, by representatives of civil society (NGOs, volunteers, etc.);

- Increasing the social status of community social workers, which will generate a greater motivation for them in overcoming social risks related to labour migration;

- The expansion and development of civil society institutions at the local level, especially in rural areas (NGOs, volunteers, etc.), which could have a real

impact in meeting the needs of children left behind by migration, including overcoming any social risks related to migration for work;
- The development of a well-functioning close cooperation between the representatives of the local public authorities and the civil society structures, in overcoming the problems related to the children left behind by migration. NGOs, being more skilled and flexible, are much more effective in overcoming the problems related to children left behind in migration and meeting the needs of this group of children;
- The organization of systematic research related to children left behind by migration necessary to improve both the legislative framework and the methods of intervention by public authorities.

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Romanian and Moldovan Migrant Families between National and Transnational Welfare Policies

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Abstract. This study is carried out on the basis of the data collected within the action project 'Children left behind by labour migration - Support of Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families in the EU' (CASTLE - Children Labour Support Transnational Families Eu) by the Center for the Study of Transnational Families. We analysed the peculiarities of welfare policies through a qualitative approach based on a set of interviews with key stakeholders collected in 2022 both in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. It highlights the reality of today's national social policies in the two states and associates the measures of public authorities and NGOs with their tendency to propose transnational welfare practices. We have comparatively identified the national social policies regarding migrant families. Our findings highlight the need for transnational expansion of public support measures for both countries.

Keywords: transnational families, social policies, transnational welfare, Romania, Republic of Moldova.

1. Introduction

Romanian migration is considered one of the most rapidly expanding in Europe (Anghel 2013). Between 1990 and 2008, the number of permanent emigrants decreased, as a consequence of temporary labour migration, a well-

known post-communist phenomenon (Dănăcică 2010). The flow of temporary emigration between 2016 and 2021 shows that over 200 thousand people per year change their residence across borders (INSSE 2022). The link between working abroad and the desire to provide a better life to one's family is a common finding in both literature and in the practice of social policies. The phenomenon of transnational families is one of the problems that postmodern Romania is facing, and the reaction of the state through social policies, should bring a range of possible solutions by granting rights, services, measures and assistance for those who are left at home (Voicu 2019). The case of Moldova is quite similar to that of Romania in terms of demographic decline caused by population migration. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of Moldovans who chose to migrate increased to over 6%, which means almost 250,000 people. Statistics show that in 2021 the resident population of the country was 2,6 million and more than one million Moldovan inhabitants were across the borders (FEF 2021: 5). The strong migration growth after 2000 can be correlated with the fact that in 1998 the Republic of Moldova was declared the poorest state in Europe (Horvath 2011: 14), which has certainly magnified the migration process. In line with the increase in the number of migrants, there is also a discussion of a new phase of migration in the Republic of Moldova, a migration that also results in the spread of the phenomenon of transnational families and children left behind (CLB). According to the CER-103 survey (Children at risk and children separated from their parents) out of the total number of 34,107 children registered by local public authorities as separated from their parents, 29,186 were children with one or both parents temporarily working abroad (CASTLE Opening Report 2022: 48).

As Piperno (2007: 66) notes, migration has also had a major impact on welfare systems in the countries of origin, causing transformations under the impact of major changes in society and the development of a parallel system of compensation through strategies that transnational families are themselves developing. In this context, there is a need to analyse how the states respond to new social realities: the increase in the number of transnational families, the increased number of children living apart from their parents for shorter or longer periods of time etc.

This article highlights the reality of today's national social policies in Romania and Moldova and associates the measures of public authorities and NGOs with their tendency to propose transnational welfare practices. Opinions and perspectives of the representatives of the public entities in Romania and Moldova were considered. We analyse peculiarities of their activity in managing the phenomenon of transnationalism and its impact on

the family. We identify the recommendations that the public representatives from Romania and Moldova mention and how they fundamentally initiate the need to bring the idea of transnational welfare to the fore. In the next section we review important conceptual contributions, in order to provide a better understanding of current social policies in the two states and how the policies on migration were approached over time. Then, we lay out the methodological context of the research by describing the data on interviewees and the analytical directions pursued.

Finally, we put forward the results of the qualitative data analysed by identifying and comparing the activity of public authorities in Romania and Moldova, including NGOs in providing support to the children left at home. Also, following the highlighting of opinions towards national or cross-border support policies and national authorities recommendations, formulate our own suggestions for improving the current social welfare policies for transnational families.

2. Literature review

Before the massive emigration of the labour force as a common point, the socio-political past of Romania and Moldova classifies them as developing welfare states (Fenger 2007). The consequences of the Soviet past on social protection, the transition after the collapse of the system and the negative effects of socialism on the economy of the post-communist states are common marks of the current social policies in Romania and Moldova (Burlacu 2007). The Republic of Moldova declared its independence from the USSR in August 1991, almost two years after Romania had liberated itself from communist rule in December 1989. The influence of the USSR on Romania and the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, although at different stages, was to a large extent manifested both at the level of state policy and at the socio-cultural level. Another important contextual aspect is that Romania has been a member of the EU since January 2007 while the Republic of Moldova formally applied for membership on 4 March 2022. Although there is a significant difference in terms of total population numbers (Romania: 19,053,815[1]; Moldova: 2.604,0[2]) both countries have experienced a long and

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[1] Romanian National Institute of Statistics, Press Release no. 210/30.08.2022, https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/poprez_ian2022r_0.pdf

[2] National Bureau of Statistics of The Republic of Moldova, *Usual resident population in the Republic of Moldova by sex and age groups at 1st January 2022*, 03.06.2022, https://statistica.gov.md/en/usual-resident-population-in-the-republic-of-moldova-by-sex-9578_59433.html

troubled period of transition which has led a large part of the population to migrate for work abroad.

Faist (2015: 21) advances the discussion by emphasizing that in the context of migration such a system would have the power to transcend the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion by being able to make space for solidarity and reciprocity mechanisms. The above author mentions the limited manner in which social systems are perceived as being tied to the nation state that provides rights on the basis of belonging to one group or another. But in the case of migration these boundaries often shift, while various national systems of protection become interconnected through migrants' practices (Faist 2015: 21).

Scholars such as Shutes and Ishkanian (2022) demonstrate through their analysis of the European migration crisis in Greece how transnational welfare can be identified in forms of collective action that can transcend the borders of nation-states in order to achieve common welfare. In the authors' opinion, the main actions taken by national and international actors (NGOs), the solidarity of different groups of people, illustrate that transnational welfare can also arise through the informal mobilization of different international actors.

2.1. Romania

Before the 2000s, the Romanian state was rather indifferent to emigration, the most important measures adopted regarding labour migration being the limitation of the flow to Israel and the approval of some bilateral treaties (Șerban 2009). During its preparation to join the European Union, Romania had to adopt new measures to control departures, the *aquis communautaire* having 'stringent requirements on the handling of illegal immigrants without EU/EFTA (European Free Trade Area) nationality' (Baldwin-Edwards 2008).

The migratory flows of Romanians made the institutions generally develop policies and programs to motivate the return to the country (Burlacu et. al 2020), while taking into account the protection and care of people who stay at home has recently been added on the public agenda of social policies in Romania. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of emigration has been increasing for over 30 years, the monitoring procedures and specific national programs addressing the issue of children left at home after the migration of their parents, are still missing (Matei and Stroe 2022).

In Eastern European countries in particular, women are the ones who are assigned the main responsibilities in the cultural framework of care, and Romanian migrant women who work as caregivers abroad have care duties for

children or other elderly relatives at home (Rogoz and Seculova 2021). According to the data[3] of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, the number of women leaving across borders did not fall below the threshold of 100,000 between 2016 and 2019. Rogoz and Sekulova (2014) find in their case study of Romanian and Slovak live-in caregivers working in 2 or 4 week shifts in Austria, that once one of the relatives is in acute need of care, Romanian women no longer work in care abroad, or give up work altogether to return home, decisions may be the result of institutional gaps in terms of state care.

Transnational parental care does not only depend on individual strategies, duties and commitments towards family members at home, but to a large extent on the permissiveness of the specific national circumstances in which migrant parents operate (Melander and Shmulyar Green 2018). Kilkey and Merla (2014) propose several institutional contexts, based on various components of the 'regime' that contribute to the resources needed for the care undertaken by transnational families. Among these institutional contexts is the welfare regime, which includes social rights to benefits and public services for health, housing, education, but more importantly, rules that provide the applicability of rights across borders.

The Romanian state's response to the needs of children with parents abroad comes as legislative changes including CLB, especially in Law no. 272 of June 21, 2004, republished, regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights, but these measures are not sufficiently calibrated to the magnitude of the phenomenon.

Since 2015, through a Governmental Decision (no. 691 of August 19, 2015), the state has required public social assistance services to request from the educational units in each territorial administrative unit, data and information regarding children with one or two parents abroad. Then, following the received lists, field visits are made in order to analyse the children's material, school performance or social relations.

In 2022, the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities adopted new measures for the protection of children with parents abroad specified in the same law mentioned above. According to the legislative changes, the parent who goes abroad is required to declare who is the person responsible for the care of the child in their absence. Caregivers can be either family members or friends of the family with whom attachment relationships have developed.

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[3]Romanian National Institute of Statistics, Table: Temporary emigrants by age groups and ages, sexes, http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table.

As in 2007, Piperno mentioned the scepticism regarding the local measures addressed to children due to the lack of ad hoc funds, the current legislative norms may receive the same vision of efficiency and effectiveness, later confirmed in our empirical material. Besides the lack of local funds, social care policies are affected by poor monitoring of CLB, lack of cooperation or ineffective communication between authorities, families' reluctance and mistrust in the state and the particular contexts for different levels of institutional intervention.

2.2. Moldova

In both Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the development of social policies by the state has been a complex process, which has had difficulty in achieving a proper balance in recent years. Countries are readjusting the framework of their older social systems to the complex processes that today's societies are going through. Migration-related social policies have only started to take shape in the past few years. The greatest pressure for governments is to put the development and implementation of these policies on the agenda comes with the mass migration of highly skilled young people. As a result of the large-scale migration from the Republic of Moldova, as Saca and Saca (2002: 114) point out, there is also a distortion of demographic processes. The same authors highlight that the present social policies are the result of a whole process that is deficient both in terms of their foundations and their implementation, and therefore there is a pressing need to develop a new type of social policy. This new type of policy must, in the authors' perspective, consist of well-defined mechanisms, adapted to the needs of today's society, diversified, non-discriminatory, and decentralized, and must involve both governmental and non-governmental institutions in their activities (Saca and Saca 2002: 114-115).

Discussing the dynamics of international migration policies, Zubenski identifies five main stages in the development of contemporary migration policies in the case of Moldova (Zubenski 2019: 220). In chronological order these are: 1 - 1990-1994 post-Soviet labour migration processes are regulated; 2 - 1994-1999 one of the most difficult periods for Moldovan migrants, a period with a severe visa regulation with EU-wide interdiction measures; 3 - 2000-2009 Portugal, Greece and Italy became the countries most affected by the often illegal migration of Moldovan citizens and in 2000-2002 bilateral agreements with these countries were signed which provided for the employment of migrants, as a result in 2005-2006 there was a mass migration of highly skilled young people as well as women from rural areas; 4 - 2010-

2016 mass migration is regulated and takes place in all directions: Romania, Russia and from April 2014 Moldova signed the EU Association Agreement; 5 - 2017-2019 (today) large-scale migration of young intellectuals, often to high-paid jobs, and the establishment of intergovernmental agreements with various EU states. (Zubenski 2019: 220-221)

The present fifth stage in the migration of Moldovan citizens deserves a particular attention in the present article. During this period, several social policies have been developed aiming to decrease the number of migrants. Examples include policies to keep young people in the country - by increasing salaries in the budgetary sector; policies to support the family; policies to create opportunities on the labour market and in the field of education; the Action Plan on Reintegration of Moldovan citizens returning from abroad (2017-2020); a series of actions and programs promoting equality and non-discrimination as well as active ageing (Zubenski 2019: 221-222). What the above author notes at the end of the analysis, however, is that these social policies aimed to decrease the number of those who choose to work abroad have not been successful. Throughout 2017 as well as in the following years the number of people involved in the migration process continued to increase. Current data show that in 2020 the Republic of Moldova had around 1,150,000 migrant citizens (NBS 2021).

With a population of citizens who migrate out of the state almost equal to half of the population remaining in the country, the Republic of Moldova, as well as Romania, need social policies that are developed in a framework that extends beyond national borders. In this sense, the discussion of the transnational welfare state becomes a key issue for this analysis. In recent years, social science researchers have turned their attention to the benefits that transnational welfare states would bring to people actively engaged in migration. Authors such as Pastore and Piperno (2006), Piperno (2007; 2008) discuss the co-welfare regime in the context of migration, stressing its importance in a global society where migration is reaching high rates. Piperno stresses the importance of "to raise awareness of the interdependence that links the development of welfare in destination and origin countries and to develop strategies that are geared towards promoting common welfare, a positive transnationalism or, in other words, what we could call 'co-welfare'" (Piperno 2007: 67).

3. Data and methods

This article is based on data collected in the project-action "Children left Behind by Labour Migration - Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU" (CASTLE - Children Labour Support Transnational Families Eu), which was implemented between 2021-2023. The project-action aimed to support the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in improving their child protection systems and migration and mobility policies, with a particular emphasis on the social and legal impact of labour migration on transnational families. To achieve this, the CASTLE team developed a qualitative multigenerational, intersectional and participatory analysis of children's rights in a transnational family context.

Between April and June 2022, 11 interviews with representatives of public authorities were conducted in the Republic of Moldova and 11 interviews with representatives of public authorities and non-governmental organizations in Romania. The interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guide structured on the following dimensions: the phenomenon at national, regional and the local level, legislation and policies (general and targeted), data collection, centralization and the monitoring of the situation of children left at home and the stakeholders involved in this process, support groups for these children, the main issues related to the cases with which the respondents came into contact, recommendations for improving services and the programs dedicated to these children and their families. A final dimension, created by the particular socio-political situation, concerned the situation of families that have been displaced by war. In Romania, the research was also extended to the NGO environment in order to capture all the actors that are actively involved in managing the situation of CLB. The link between public authorities and NGOs, both parties involved in managing the situation of these children, has emerged from the first interviews conducted with representatives of the public authorities. Respondents from both countries hold positions of expertise in public administrations dealing with the issue of CLB. Respondents from NGOs are themselves experts who have developed, coordinated or been active in programmes for left behind children.

4. Findings

The government and local public authorities of Romania and Republic of Moldova have long recognized the need for enhanced measures to protect CLB whose parents have gone abroad to work. However, the efficient management of this phenomenon becomes more and more important in the situation when, amidst the background of globalization processes, the migratory phenomenon

will register an even greater intensity, and the given phenomenon - transnational families and CLB will become more widespread and will acquire new forms of manifestation that can generate new social risks.

In this section we develop a comparative analysis of the national support measures of the authorities of the two states, the major challenges for their activity and their perspectives on transnational welfare practices.

4.1. The institutional response of the authorities - national welfare policies

4.1.1. Perspectives on laws: effectiveness and applicability gaps

Most respondents believe that Romania has legislation designed to provide a support framework for families who are in a position to leave their children at home when they go to work abroad. Moreover, in recent years, under pressure from the NGO environment and beyond, there have been a number of initiatives to develop the best possible legislative framework - some transposed into law, others currently under parliamentary debate.

> *"We don't lack the law, the procedure seems very fair to me, I wouldn't complicate it at this moment. If it was respected, popularized and known, we would have no problem with the procedure." (*authority expert, RO).

In Moldova, the representatives of the local public authorities consider that this framework allows them to effectively exercise their competencies in relation to the phenomenon of transnational families:

> *"Law no. 140 solved several problems regarding children left behind whose parents are abroad. According to Law 140, social workers must inform custodians about their responsibilities. A welcome change to this law is the fact that the parent can send a letter to complete the documents for custody and by email, Viber, etc. (...) At the central level, legislation should be adjusted so that the responsibility of parents abroad is not lost."*
> (authority expert, MD).

Also, the respondents' identification of a series of laws structuring the framework for dealing with the situation of CLB reveals what the actors who invoke the existence of a strong legislative framework claim:

> *"Law 212/1920 on Custody, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Civil Code, Law 140 for Children at Risk, Law on Social Assistance, Charity Services, Framework Regulation on Day Care Service, etc."*
> (authority expert, MD).

Despite the fact there is legislation in force, some of the stakeholders have doubts about how it is actually applied on the ground. Most often the reason given is the instrumentality and use of relations to influence how the law is applied:

> *"In our country, in the Republic of Moldova, the legislation is strong, but, with regret, we do not comply with it because of: relatives, friends..., so in this field, the legislation is very good. Once the law 140 imposes you, you are obliged, but there are obstacles (...)"* (authority expert, MD).

Although some respondents point to the existence of a certain degree of corruption, the use of relationships, which often prevent the application of the law, there are voices who consider that a large part of the responsibility for these children should fall on the teachers who are in direct contact with the children and who unfortunately often fail to create and maintain a good communication with the actors involved (family, children, authorities):

> *"I believe that the legal framework exists, perhaps not very well implemented. Even the law on custody, the law on authorities, the law on social workers all exist. It's the responsibility of the schools, the head teacher, but I think it's about implementation. They are insufficiently implemented. When a child is left alone, I don't see the state providing any benefits."* (authority expert, MD).

Local authority representatives however indicate that, despite their participation in the debate on how legislation can be improved and developed, they have no powers and competencies in this respect, since these are the responsibility of central authorities.

> *"I think this is a matter for the central authorities. We participated in the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and the Parliamentary Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Parliamentary Committee on Social Protection, with Law 99 on children with deviant behaviour, because there is a lack of specialized centres for such children and as a result of the debates it was proposed to amend the legislation or to come up with adjustments to Law 140 to help these children, especially those who use toxic substances, drugs and who are addicted."* (authority expert, MD).

These type of consultations between the various authorities' bodies have not been entirely without result. While the law created for the protection of left-behind children can still be improved, respondents stress the importance of its

existence and its implementation, as well as the need for research to form the base for future recommendations.

> *"Now the legislation has been harmonized, especially for them this form of protection - custody - specifically for migrant children - has been made, which is quite good. It might be worth amending the legislation to monitor these children in order to close certain gaps, to develop legislative proposals. Similarly, the Migration and Asylum office (...) to do some research and on the basis of that to make improvement proposals."* (authority expert, MD).

In Romania, there are difficulties in the applicability of the law due to various shortcomings that minimize the efficiency of social activity. On the one hand, competent institutions often lack the resources (financial, time and human resources) to advise and monitor these families.

> *"We are not satisfied here in Cluj because of the abundance of cases and gaps in the social service, we cannot take care of these children as we should."* (authority expert, RO).

> *"In our country, in the Republic of Moldova, the legislation is strong, but, unfortunately, we do not comply with it: our nepotism, friends ..., so in this field, the legislation is very good. ... Here we should all get involved in promoting the new generation, that is my opinion.... If we do not pay attention to the young generation, we will not invest, we will not have results."* (authority expert, MD).

On the other hand, the complexity of the working tools applied, such as observation and monitoring papers, excessive bureaucracy and at the same time, the methodology of their application in the field when the main objective is to identify the problems directly through communication that requires gaining confidence, can hinder the activity of social workers.

> *"For a social worker who does not have specialized studies, it is very difficult to complete that observation paper because things should be a bit simplified and captured in an essential work procedure. (...) When walking in the field, you have to pay distributive attention, you have to see what happens to the child, to the family environment. These procedures are very tough, the working documents, everything must be well summarized in one document, not thousands of files that practically are of no use to anyone at all and prevent us from the real intervention that the child needs."* (authority expert, RO).

4.1.2. Difficulties in monitoring and centralizing data

Collecting data at the local level on children with parents across borders is one of the logistical challenges the authorities face. The law assigns the county social assistance departments the responsibility to collect data from all town halls that request data from local schools. Because of poor cooperation, there are gaps in the databases that are later sent to the national authority.

> *"We've been collecting this data since 2006, but we've never had it all. The town halls, SPAS (public social assistance services) at the town hall level, territorial administrative units do not answer us. We never succeeded with all the efforts we put in to collect all the data from the 65 town halls that the county has, only forty or so, forty seven, fifty we didn't reach."* (authority expert, RO).

The necessity to collect and aggregate the data on children left at home is a challenge faced by the Moldovan authorities. Inconsistency and discrepancies between different databases make it impossible to know the real number of children in this situation and the difficulties that they and their families face.

> *"I don't have a statistic, and I don't know if there is accurate data on the number of children left here in the care of a family member. Unfortunately I don't have exact data, we are also focusing on some studies that are done in stages by our partners abroad."* (authority expert, MD)

Representatives of public authorities almost unanimously mention the need for a common database to centralize information on CLB. In the interviews, a recurrent topic refers to a certain lack of cooperation between the various institutional representatives, who, while not having direct responsibilities and powers in managing the situation of CLB, could nevertheless play an important role in providing access to the databases they hold.

> *"I was saying that it would be good to have a common database with the police department, with the border police department, with the authorities, with the municipal administration [...] to be able to work together and have access to the database and have the real figure. (...) With children there are no problems. But it would be good to work more closely with the authorities - border police, asylum centres - to have access to data. We need to know that the mother who has 2-3 children at home and goes abroad, to appear in the system when she crosses the border, to find out with whom the children have stayed, to ensure a control of how many have emigrated,*

how many have returned, or how many children have stayed in the country and how many are with their parents." (authority expert, MD).

There are some institutional actors who argue that this whole situation, left somewhat to inter-institutional adjustment, could be better managed by developing instruments and procedures that are legislative and therefore mandatory.

"We don't have statistics as such, because they cannot be collected without mandatory instruments. There are some reports that educational institutions make, but they are relative, because not all of them present objective information about the fact that parents have left or returned. It is somehow not mandatory as a form of recording children at risk." (authority expert, MD).

4.1.3. *Cooperation with NGOs and other institutions*

The collaboration and partnerships of public authorities with non-governmental organizations in order to improve the quality and efficiency of social services for vulnerable groups are increasingly visible in recent years in Romania. Support programs for children left at home have become a common objective on the agenda of state entities and non-governmental organizations.

From the first interviews with representatives of public institutions, we found that it is necessary to include respondents and representatives of the NGO environment.

"There are many NGOs that come and do activities with these children from the placement centres, or NGOs that offer psychological therapy services, from time to time and depending on the projects that certain NGOs run." (authority expert, RO).

"Yes, there are many collaboration conventions between the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) and NGOs at the county level, and we participate in activities that bring us together precisely to interact and intervene immediately, and it brings a plus to all the services provided." (authority expert, RO).

A particular and important aspect to mention for the case of Romania is the fact that the partnerships between institutions and NGOs is facilitated by the projects financed by the European Union, a statement confirmed by our respondents.

"There are quite a few non-governmental organizations, there were even those European funds for children left at home (...) and the non-

governmental organizations, somehow they were able to professionalize their part of the intervention as well, including in collaboration with state institutions, school and town hall." (NGO expert, RO).

"(...) We did projects with the teachers, that was our working model, we taught them to write projects. They wrote, they sent us a kind of school grant for funding, and part of the actions, exactly for this type of intervention, to support children and prevent certain phenomena." (NGO expert, RO).

The empirical material from Moldova reveals the need for a framework of collaboration between NGOs and public authorities.

"I know that there is at the NGO level, Neovita Health Center offers youth and parents, there are partnerships for each child, which also has a program for parents, CENEPAC develops assistance for abused children and parents, i.e. there are NGOs that provide services for parents as well. (...) Of course we should. There was a commercial on TV last year showing how parents should proceed before departure, the same, passing the information from people to people, and as a result, parents address and proceed correctly." (authority expert, MD).

In the Republic of Moldova there are also a number of cooperation initiatives with NGOs. This strategy is often developed by the public authorities out of the inability to deal with the large number of CLB. However, more often than not, the NGO sector - national and international - comes to families in need by developing dedicated programs.

"A few years ago there was a platform of non-governmental associations, which approached this issue from the perspective of the existence of a Parents' Code, treated as a normative act, mandatory to be brought to the parents' attention so that they are aware that what is being done is for the good of the child and so on, and I consider this procedure of the existence of the Parents' Code as the best way to solve the issue of monitoring children left at home." (authority expert, MD).

4.2. Transnational welfare practices

Social protection and social inequalities as transnational phenomena are insufficiently addressed even though they cross national borders and involve a mix of state and non-state arrangements (Faist 2013). As we mentioned in the first part of this paper, the European Union is a distinctive factor between the two countries and their approach to the social policies of migration. Before

Romania became a member of the EU, even during the negotiation period, the European authorities imposed solutions for illegal emigration from the country, then the country's response to the adaptation of these rules was very much focused on "exit-returns from/ to the country to/ from abroad" (Șerban 2009: 10). The harmonization of policies regarding immigration and asylum policies has been closely related to the objectives of EU strategies over time, and then attention was also directed to other areas such as labour migration and integration policies (Boswell 2005: 11). Although the institutions of the European Union want to share the common policy framework for the social protection of migrants, some member states limit or focus welfare policies based on residence. National authorities may consider that migrants reside in another country and their interests belong to another state, thus social exclusion may occur (Scheibelhofer 2022:166). Romania is a similar case, but the social protection situation is lagging behind the cooperation of the European community and the determination of beneficial instruments for Romanians across the borders.

The Republic of Moldova is in the process of joining the European Union, but the relations with the EU authorities are old precisely because of the relations of the Moldovan emigrants with the European countries of destination (Roșca 2017: 247). As an EU member, Moldova can strengthen a potential framework for the development of transnational social policies to support its emigrants.

With national policies relatively lacking in specifically targeting migration, Romania and Moldova are lagging behind in the development of the idea of welfare practices across borders. The tendency of public entities to plead for possible agreements, communication, monitoring and support relations between states is found in our results.

Before discussing the need to connect national social protection with that of destination countries, it is important to provide a background of some situations that involved cross-border communication between authorities and migrant parents. Parents who leave and need support practices across borders, must first solve their 'problems' left at home. Many of the respondents stated that the migrant parents are not informed about the legislative procedure for the derogation of parental rights or they want to take the legislative steps only a few days before leaving, probably at the request of the employers in the host country. There were situations when the parents were already away and asked from a distance to start the whole process. As previously noted, communication is starting to improve between parents and the Romanian authorities, even across borders.

> *"(...) We faced situations when the father was already away and expressed his desire from there, from another region, from another country like the mother or the grandparents to take care of the children by delegation of parental rights. I know that the court issued and favourably resolved such requests, but if we are to look at the law strictly, these requests should be made before the parent is out of the country."* (authority expert, RO)

> *"We had, for example, the situation of a child who played football and had to go with the team on a tournament in Poland, and not having the signature of the parent or a legal representative, he could not go. The grandmother came at that time, very agitated, quickly, quickly let's give her power of attorney, we're sorry, it's not possible."* (authority expert, RO)

Inter-institutional communication between Romania and other states regarding the welfare policies of migrant families is currently non-existent, especially in terms of local authority. From the statements, such a collaboration could be a sustainable solution due to the sharing of data on the people who need support, as well as the exchange of best practices for the benefit of the transnational families they deal with.

> *"The relationship with the countries where they go should be arranged as quickly as possible. It should... at the moment it doesn't exist... if I have a family going abroad on record, I can turn to my counterpart there and tell him: these are the problems, help him deal with the school."* (authority expert, RO).

The interviews reveal the need to establish a database in which the situation of parents who leave abroad to work is regularly updated. This is mentioned by the representatives of the public authorities as being extremely important for a good and timely management of the cases. The existence of such a database could avoid wasting time and work for cases that have changed their situation before being contacted (parents return or take their children with them, etc.).

> *"I am thinking of a database which can be accessed by any state and for the purpose of prevention and the provision of social services, where Romanian families settle, and on the one hand, to inform the parents who move to another country regarding the needs of children left at home. And this platform, database to somehow allow interconnection between states and, on the other hand, to facilitate access to parents. and vice versa, from parent to child."* (authority expert, RO).

Complementing the statement of public authorities in Romania, the NGO perspective reinforces the idea of the necessity of transnational welfare policies.

> *"I was actually thinking about the situation of the children left here, and it would be useful to have agreements with states, legislation, easier working conditions that would allow parents to take leave more often. (...) practically some working conditions that address, that include their right to family life would be very useful from the perspective of the countries they go to."* (NGO expert, RO)

As in the case of Romania, when representatives of public authorities discuss the issue of CLB, the development of monitoring tools and the implementation of policies that will lead to a better management of the situation, both for the good of the child and the family as a whole, they end up invoking a series of initiatives that can be associated with transnational welfare practices: the need for common databases to which both the countries from which parents go abroad to work and the host countries have access; the development of official channels of communication between the bodies of the various countries on the situation of the CLB; the creation at international level of supporting legislative frameworks to make it easier for parents to go abroad to work together with their children; the organization of various programmes to maintain the link between children left at home and parents and relatives who have gone abroad to work, etc.

An example of this type of programme, aimed at developing a transnational framework to ensure that the link between those left behind and those left behind is provided by the Republic of Moldova.

> *"Well, we try somehow, once a year we do this Diaspora, Origins, Returns (DOR) programme, this summer camp for children, it's the third edition (...) Children from the Republic of Moldova also participate in DOR, to try to keep this connection between the children from back home and those who have left. And in the first editions, if I remember, one of the criteria was that one of the parents had to be abroad."* (authority expert, MD)

5. Discussions

Based on the narrated experience and the statements of the responding entities from Romania and Moldova, we bring forward some suggestions for the first steps towards the evolution of transnational welfare social practices and policies. First of all, due to the need for better monitoring, it is absolutely

necessary to create international databases that can be accessed by all states and bodies empowered to provide support to children left at home. The said databases could facilitate the access to a quick communication with parents whose children remained in the country. Then, it would be advisable for the national authorities to propose and apply supporting legislative frameworks that facilitate the departure of parents to work abroad with minor children.

Another suggestion would be to set up some local support groups and the international facilitation of communication and the relationship of both these groups and the families with the local authorities in the country/region of destination. The interviews revealed examples of situations that require the foundation of such networks in order to improve norms and support services for children and their families.

The European Union can lend important factors to strengthen a transnational welfare system for the migrants of the two states. As Romania is a member state, it can expand its current welfare system for the millions of Romanians across the borders. Our empirical results confirm the fact that the European Commission's funding of support projects for children left at home improved the institution-NGO relationship. The representatives of the authorities and non-governmental organizations have acquired working tools in the activity of supporting transnational families and a broadening of the usual skills in their activity.

For Moldova, the projected accession to the European Union could enable the start of a system of transnational policies for the country's emigrants. This way, Moldova could build on the good practices of other member states, while avoiding the national deficits of others. International cooperation is, as we saw in the respondents' statements, a key factor in stabilizing the well-being of transnational families.

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Participatory Research and Social Action with Adolescents Concerning Transnational Families

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Abstract. Social community action initiatives for adolescents and children can promote civic involvement, self-efficacy, and positive youth development. Children who are disempowered by their age and dependence on adults may use social activism projects to improve or ameliorate social and community concerns (Torres-Harding et al. 2018; Willson et al. 2007) and contribute to the well-being and resilience of themselves and their peers. The current article focuses on presenting the outcomes of the YouCreate participatory action research model from the Republic of Moldova, carried out by Terre des Homme Moldova and delivered as part of the CASTLE project, as a promising method of involving young people in adolescent-led projects aimed at social change. At the centre of this programme is an empowerment intervention that provides adolescents from transnational families with opportunities for civic engagement with other young people in issues of common concern in their schools and communities to improve the quality of life of children and young people whose parents are working abroad. Young people developed and implemented five community interventions in five different localities in the Republic of Moldova. The programmes were developed drawing on the results of participatory research based on interviews and focus groups with transnational family members (parents who had left for work or stayed at home, children, and left-behind caregivers) and on assessments made by adolescents at the community level. Our results show that teenage participants most appreciated the improvement in the quality of peer-to-peer relationships and child-adult relationships in the community, increased awareness to the needs of children in transnational families, and the empowering effect on their active involvement in managing challenges in the community.

1. Introduction

In the Republic of Moldova, labour migration plays a crucial role in the country's economic development, with remittances significantly impacting the national economy, contributing to poverty reduction and increasing the population's well-being (Vaculovschi 2023a).

This trend is widespread because of the bad economy, and it has both positive and negative effects on the country (Gagauz 2023; Rusu 2022; Tabac and Gagauz 2020). This is true even though the recent COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily slowed it down (Rusu 2022; Gagauz et al. 2023; the vast majority of those forced to return home were planning to go back abroad when jobs and borders opened). "[…] the intensity of migration from Moldova is so high that this phenomenon has become a major factor in the depopulation of the country" (Tabac and Gagauz 2020: 166).

The phenomenon of mass emigration has established a "labour migration culture" (Tabac and Gagauz 2020: 163) that, along with poverty, influences and facilitates migration aspirations. Therefore, seeing as the phenomenon of parents working abroad will remain a constant challenge for Moldovan society, families, and their members, it is crucial to implement coping strategies that can help mitigate the negative effects on children's well-being and preserve or enhance the positive ones.

Parental migration has predominantly been examined in the context of its negative consequences. The primary vulnerabilities lie in emotional well-being and associated challenges: deficiency in feelings of security, attachment, and safety, leading to emotional deprivation, loneliness, anxiety and depression (Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Turcan 2023; Wang et al. 2022; Botezat and Pfeiffer 2019; Tomsa and Jenaro 2015), higher levels of responsibility, protection of parents, a feeling of guilt (Ducu et al. 2023; Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Cheianu-Andrei et al. 2011), and lower levels of social trust, which is a long-term risk factor for adult depression (Wang et al. 2022). Some other major issues are health and learning difficulties, trouble with peers (hard to fit in, more bullying), and problematic behaviours (Botezat and Pfeiffer 2019; Cheianu-Andrei 2023). At the social level, there is a significant lack of awareness and acceptance by the community and peers (Cheianu-Andrei 2023).

The increasing body of research, and especially those quantitative studies that used control groups, has significantly contributed to a more

nuanced exploration of the mixed impacts of parental absence. Several factors with a mediating effect have been identified: if one or both parents leaving; for how long; the gender of the parents - usually the mother's absence is perceived as more challenging (Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Cebotari 2018; Wang 2023; Wang et al. 2022) but for the boys this could be the father's migration (Vanore 2015); the age of the child left at home (Wang et al. 2022); the caregiver – the continuity of care (Cebotari 2018); quality of child-parent relationship and communication before, during and after migration (Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Ducu 2023; Turcan 2023), the economic situation of the family and the motivation of parent leaving (Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Ducu et al. 2023; Vanore 2015).

Many studies have shown that transnational families are able to improve their economic conditions, which is an essential resource for the well-being of children. When further examining the positive impact of parents' working abroad on their children, we find a strong sense of autonomy, independence, and increased responsibility (Bezzi 2013; Ducu et al. 2023; Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė 2018; László et al. 2023). Furthermore, Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė (2018) argue that transnational migration can foster closer ties between siblings and create a support network between older and younger children.

2. Coping with the adversity of parental migration

Research findings indicate a moderating influence of resilience on the association between childhood adverse life events (such as abuse, abandonment, parental separation, poverty, limited access to education, etc.) and the development of mental health issues (Wade et al. 2022). In other words, resilience occurs when a combination of environmental, social, and human variables disrupts the progression from exposure to risk to the development of harm or contributes to the positive development of young individuals in the presence of adverse circumstances (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Zimmerman et al. 2013).

Resilience theory significantly emphasises adopting a strengths-based approach when designing preventative treatments. This approach focuses on increasing promotive traits, rather than only minimising exposure to risk or addressing weaknesses in young individuals (Zimmerman et al. 2013; Wang et al. 2015), and considered a promising approach in the case of children left behind when used to prevent the harmful effects of parents missing (Lee et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2015).

Zhou and colleagues (2021), examining the resilience of children left behind, found that they have lower levels of psychological resilience, more fragile parent-child communication, and shallower resources compared to their peers whose parents did not go to work abroad. In a rural setting, Liu and colleagues (2020) found that only maternal migration negatively affects child resilience. Harmonious relationships with parents, supportive friends, and caring teachers were found to be supportive factors in our study. The school-home relationship was found to have a lower but positive effect.

School, as an essential area of a child's life, is of particular importance for children struggling with a parent's absence. School belonging, supportive relationships with peers, and caring teachers positively impact the mental well-being of children left behind (Wang 2023). Chai and colleagues (2018), examining subjective well-being, found that it is well predicted (along with psychological resilience) by trusting relationships with caregivers (parents, grandparents, or other relatives—in whose care the child is left during the migration of one or both parents) and by neighbourhood social cohesion.

In order to protect the resilience and well-being of the children left behind, the above scholars, like other authors (Cheianu-Andrei 2023; Ducu 2023; Turcan 2023; Vaculovschi 2023b), advise that child protection and welfare agencies, in addition to attempts to remedy the causes of parental migration, also focus on initiating and developing resilience-building programs (in school and community); parent-caregiver-child programs that foster trust, communication, and resilience in the relationships between them. In addition, local and national influences are identified as playing a role in fostering a safe and trusting atmosphere in communities based on neighbourhood mutual support.

3. Participatory action research and art-based community intervention with adolescents

Participatory action research, where young people can express their views and feel that their opinions matter while at the same time being actively involved in better tackling challenging issues that matter to them, is a promising method to promote the development and well-being of young people and children (Lee et al. 2019; Ozer 2016; Raanaas 2020).

Involving children or young people as co-researchers in studies aimed at understanding their perspectives has been widely discussed, with both benefits and challenges identified (Camponovo et al. 2021; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2013; Lomax 2012; Lundy et al. 2011). Children's participation can give researchers more direct access to information about how they see the world

and what happens to them, leading to new insights that add to and improve research findings (Camponovo et al. 2021; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2013). It is essential to specify that Lomax (2012) points out that the evidence from child co-researchers is different, complementary to the findings from adults, and not superior knowledge. When young people participate as co-researchers (or action-lead researchers in action research), this experience can enhance their self-esteem, critical thinking, social skills, autonomy, engagement, problem-solving, sense of competence and belonging (László et al. 2023; Lee et al. 2019; Kellett 2010; Ozer 2016; Raanaas 2020). Furthermore, being able to actively contribute to a genuine research project as co-researchers alongside experienced researchers can also influence relationships between adults and adolescents and allow the latter to express their views in an authentic way (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2016; Lee et al. 2019; Ozer 2016). At the same time, it is important, as Raanaas et al. (2020) point out in their scoping review, that young people may become more vulnerable instead of more resilient if their involvement is not authentic or if the research knowledge is not turned into actions that involve them. The power and strength divide (strong adults and weak children) is relieved in such a situation. By engaging in community and social intervention as participatory action, children and adolescents can enhance their civic participation, self-confidence, and positive development. Social activism can also empower children, who often face age-related and adult-imposed barriers, to address social and community issues that affect them (Torres-Harding et al. 2018; Willson et al. 2007).

In participatory action research, working with sensitive subjects or vulnerable groups, arts-based methods are an appropriate and effective way (Árnadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2023), which may positively impact youth affected by adversities. The different artistic methods - dance, music, drawing, painting, storytelling, puppetry and others, are child-friendly languages often used in everyday life. Left behind children and teenagers also often use artistic tools to communicate with parents. For example, when parents cannot visit home on holidays, children often create artwork to express their feelings and share with their parents (Cheianu-Andrei 2023).

Mitchel (2015) describes visual art as a tool of empowerment for marginalised or excluded adolescents (those who are not allowed to speak up or have a voice). Through creative and art activities, adolescents can express their psychological challenges, emotions, and thoughts (Kim 2015) in such ways that can help them improve their resilience, mental health and well-being (Bungay et al. 2013; D'Amico et al. 2016; Zarobe and Bungay 2017).

In their study, Zarobe and colleagues (2017) highlighted additional benefits derived from participants when the arts activities were undertaken in a group or community, where the outcome (co-creation) depends on the skills and cooperation of all participants. These include mutual assistance, connection, the experience of accepting and supporting each other and enhancing creativity through interaction.

4. The current adolescents-led social action programs context

The research carried out by the CASTLE - Children Left Behind by Labour Migration project is defined as participatory, with the comprehensive involvement of adolescents throughout the research process - from the creation of the research design to the analysis of the results and the formulation of recommendations, of which a critical analysis was presented in a previous paper (László et al. 2023). The research also has a considerable action aspect ensured through meetings and consultations with representatives of institutions and organisations involved in the protection of children's rights and through adolescent-led community action programmes (in schools and local communities). This study examines this latter phase of the research project.

4.1. Aims

The first aim is to empower young people, members of transnational families, in the development and implementation of civic engagement initiatives (peer-to-peer education, outreach activities, community initiatives, etc.) based on the needs of young people, including children and adolescents with the experience of parents working abroad in their home communities. The second aim is to create and strengthen the support network of young people left at home by raising community awareness of their needs and mobilising adults and peers to facilitate their inclusion.

4.2. Methodology

The research team used the 'YouCreate' Methodology in the Republic of Moldova, developed by Terre des Homes Moldova and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development, to achieve the above objectives. This innovative and action-oriented participatory approach empowers young people to use their creativity and agency to create positive change in their lives and communities. The methodology is grounded in the principles of child rights, youth-led development, arts-based action research, participation, and social justice, designed to be flexible and adaptable to the local context and the

needs and interests of the youth group (Currie et al. 2019a; Currie et al. 2019b).

YouCreate trains young leaders to guide their peers in participatory 'Art Actions', which are arts-based activities designed to address issues important to young people in their community. Through the creation and implementation of 'Art Actions', young people are taught how to map and analyse key community issues and challenges around a particular theme (in this case, parental labour migration and transnational families), as well as how to collaboratively select which sub-themes to focus on in their specific intervention, derived from their assessment results and identified as feasible and relevant by their peer team (Currie et al. 2020; Currie et al. 2019a; Currie et al. 2019b). Evidence to date suggests that YouCreate positively impacts young people by fostering leadership, resilience, a sense of belonging, participation in decision-making processes, good adult-youth partnerships and overall well-being (International Institute for Child Rights and Development 2018; Lee et al. 2019).

The teenagers and allied adults (teachers and/or educational professionals) trained and supported by specialists from the Terre des Homme Moldova to apply the YouCreate method work on the following five steps of this participatory action research method:

a. Preparation: identifying key community resources and challenges from an adult labour migration perspective; gathering ideas for change and programme objectives:

b. Exploration: researching migration and transnational families, e.g. using interviews, surveys, observations or media content analysis, the causes and effects of the problems can be addressed, as well as resources and opportunities for action in their communities;

c. Planning: This includes choosing the most suitable artistic medium and technique to convey the formulated messages, developing the logistics of project implementation, budget and defining the roles and responsibilities of the members;

d. Art-action implementation: according to the chosen target group in the community (e.g. school community, community of transnational families, community of policymakers, whole local community), artistic intervention is created and implemented in a specific public space to inform and raise awareness generating dialogue and inspiring action;

f. Reflection & sharing: The impact and results of the project are evaluated by the members of the initiative groups, and the findings are shared with other groups or stakeholders using online platforms, meetings or events.

Mental health and resilience are concepts that YouCreate uses with trainers, together with adult allies (teachers or/and educational professionals), in an attempt to encourage and support young people to create an atmosphere of safety, respect, value, connection, and hope in a (also) fun setting. The internalisation of these principles is facilitated through time for self-reflection, sharing, team building and celebrating achievements at the end of the programme.

Each phase involves a series of art-based activities that are led by Youth Leaders, inspired by a variety of artistic fields, visual and performing arts (such as theatre, dance, music, graffiti, photography or video, etc.), traditional arts, digital arts, culinary arts and other manifestations of creative endeavour (Currie et al. 2020; Currie et al. 2019a; Currie et al 2019b).

This paper reports findings from qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts with adolescent leaders and trainers (6 interviews), researcher notes, minutes, and activity presentation materials.

4.3. Participatory art-based action research, results and discussion

While previous phases of the CASTLE research project involved children but were adult-led activities (László et al. 2023), with the YouCreate method, we have moved to adolescent-led activities supported by adults (researchers, trainers, and allied adults).

To recruit participants, project calls were published for youth aged 14-18. They could apply in a group of at least two adolescents and an allied adult, preferably a civic education teacher (teachers or/and educational professionals). If selected, the adolescents had to commit themselves to attending a training session on the YouCreate method, taking a leadership role in mobilising young people in the community and forming a team of at least ten adolescents to develop and implement community action on the issue of transnational families. The professional and financial resources of supporting adults (teachers, specialists, and researchers) were provided for the development and implementation of these activities. The calls were advertised in all localities without having selected a specific area because "*The phenomenon of migration can be found in every town, in every village in the Republic of Moldova*" (Simona, trainer[1]).

The involvement of young people from transnational families beside young people without parental experience of working abroad has been encouraged, because as both the CASTLE research (Cheianu-Andrei 2023;

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[1]https://www.facebook.com/tdhmoldova/posts/pfbid0kiL4UUZxaWb71UigNwqY5Gr7yU1f T1krYBZThtcm1utKBj3iwFS4GPQGQeEwcF9kl

Turca 2003) and other studies (Wang 2023) have shown one of the challenges faced by children left behind is loneliness and sadness, feelings which can be alleviated by the sense of belonging to a group and the support of peers. Thus, young members of transnational families were among the leaders, members of the initiation teams, and members involved in implementing community social Art actions.

From the applicants, five teams (the Core YouCreate teams: two adolescents and one teacher) from five different localities were selected, and attended a three-day training session on the You Create methodology organised by Terre des homme Moldova.

The main topics covered were: discussion of the key findings of the CASTLE research (including the needs of children of transnational families living at home and other family members and carers; stereotypes based on direct and indirect personal experiences in relation to the results of the studies); basic principles, artistic and technical methods through which young people can be empowered and their voices heard; effective collaboration and the basics of project management.

> *"We talked about wellness, about economics... about how to become a good team, about inclusive community, about the phenomenon of migration for work abroad."* (Tamara, adolescent leader)

> *"Art is the most complex and, at the same time, the simplest way to express and convey messages, to share emotions and experience. [...] we want to give a voice to young people with experience of migration and motivate them to participate in decision-making in their schools and communities."* (Corina, trainer, researcher)

The teenage leaders returning to their communities have formed a local initiative team, inviting other teens aged 14-18 who are interested in improving the quality of life of transnational families and/or community action. In the five localities, 59 adolescents, with the guidance of 10 allied adults (teachers and/or educational professionals), formed the teams that implemented the activities through YouCreate (the Core YouCreate team of 10-15 adolescents and one teacher, as YouCreate teams). Two Extended YouCreate CASTLE teams chose to work with school communities, and three with the whole local community. The exploration of the situation regarding the phenomenon of adults leaving for work was carried out at the level of the chosen communities using questionnaires or interviews.

"We have contacted all the authorities to find out what they know about the children left at home, how many there are and what they need." (Milana, teen leader)

"We folded the questionnaires in the shops. People come to buy all sorts [of things], and then we asked them. We also left some with the sellers... to fill in there, and we went after a while to pick them up." (Antonina, teen leader)

"We worked at the school, so we asked the teachers more and some of the children, pupils."(Ludmila, teen leader)

"We didn't know either. There are a lot of children... about half of the children at our school have such experience, they have or had parents who left." (Milana, teen leader)

4.4. Topics and methods, types of activities

The teenagers evaluated the answers they received, with the support of their teachers, and discussed them in conjunction with what they had learned in the training module. They analysed the needs and resources of their team and community to determine the purpose of their intervention and creative arts intervention activities.

After analysing the results of the mapping of local resources, needs and possibilities, the young people chose creative intervention activities through art and developed their detailed action plans. This plan and the related budget were sent to Terre des Homme Moldova for consultation and approval in order to fund the activities (Art actions).

In each community, the aim was to improve relationships, particularly between children and between children and adults. One team chose to provide concrete support to parents and children in maintaining relationships using technological resources by organising training sessions for younger children to develop digital skills. Encouraging children and parents to create digital visuals (joint drawings) and present them together facilitated the practice and use of digital skills by both children and adults.

> *"We want to focus on how the children who stay at home feel. With this project, we want to contribute to better communication between children and their parents abroad, using modern technologies."* (Tamara, adolescent leader)

Three of the five teams also decided to organise meetings with parents, carers and children to raise awareness of the needs of children left at home. The younger a child is left at home, the more vulnerable to adversity they become.

This is a fact supported by many studies worldwide, which is also true for Moldova, so awareness of the importance of parents' decisions for the child's well-being is unavoidable. Without stigmatising or blaming parents who decide to leave, the children also wanted to empower adults and the community in whose care the child will remain after the parents leave.

Among the methods of empowerment through art, the visual arts were favoured (pyrography, graffiti, photo voice), including digital arts (children-parents common online) pictures or drawings.

> *"I chose only pyrography and not the debates now because it is a harrowing subject for us...and we don't talk about it. We need some joint creation (…) we have to get used to the theme."* (Antonina, adolescent leader)

In addition to children and young people, parents, caregivers, representatives of local child protection authorities and other community members were involved in the activities. The 19 activities involved 267 pupils, 30 psychologists and teachers and 118 parents and carers as participants.

From pictures, paintings, and drawings, exhibitions have been organised, some at the school level, others at the community level. In one locality, the event was complemented by a concert organised with the help of the town hall to attract more participants. Several PowerPoint presentations and videos were produced and disseminated in open and closed social networking groups, where they can be accessed by adults or children affected by migration issues. The cumulative presentation of the results, using narrative techniques, was also made at an international conference organised in Chisinau with the participation of representatives of local and national authorities responsible for children's welfare and the academic world.

4.5. Impact on adolescents involved

Young leaders report changes as a result of participating in the YouCreate programme, mainly in terms of knowledge about the phenomenon, a more empathetic approach and the ability to offer support to children left at home. Feeling useful and contributing to change is another important experience reported by respondents.

> *"These days have made me think and rethink a lot of things. I understood that I can contribute to change."* (Tatiana, teen leader)

Another aspect highlighted was the importance of creating new relationships with others, adults or youth, who are interested in or passionate about similar things.

> *"I came to meet people. I liked that I could meet new people to socialise with."* (Eleonora, teen leader)

As for young respondents' views on child-led action programs, they draw attention to the importance of peer-to-peer relationships. They report experiences of more youthful children being more open to a teenager than to an adult, especially if that teenager has had similar experiences. Relationships between children and surrounding adults can be more distant in transnational families, so proximity to another older child can bring consolation (Wang et al. 2023; Cheianu-Andrei 2023).

> *"It was great that we could be trainers for the younger ones on digital topics.[…] It was impressive to be important to younger children, to tell me, to ask me about everything. I think we have to remember that they need us older children."* (Ludmila, teen leader).

CASTLE's research child respondents complained about a lack of understanding from their community and peers (Cheianu-Andrei 2023). This lack of understanding may be due to a lack of information from peers or their misperceptions based on superficial impressions, which can be changed through participatory action research. One participant commented on his change in this way:

> *"If they told me they missed their parents, I said, 'You will get over it'. Now, I don't say that anymore. I am listening to them. I am more empathetic ... I can feel their situation."* (Ludmila, teenage leader)

4.6. Impact on adolescent-adult relationships

The literature provides ambivalent data on the perception of the adult-child relationship as a supporting factor. Wang (2023) argues that this shows that the adult-child relationship is culturally influenced and that a close child-adult relationship only acts as a protective factor if it is open and supportive. In families and schools where authoritarian adult attitudes predominate, children tend to distance themselves from the adult and do not perceive the adult's presence as a resource. During the YouCreate CASTLE community-art actions, the children experienced positive changes in this field. An inclination towards a positive (caring, taking young people seriously) attitude, both during the planning stages and during the implementation of artistic social actions or afterwards. Including representatives of local authorities.

> *"The relationship with Professor X was interesting. She changed. She also participated as an adult ally in the project. I got to know her differently;*

she was warmer, more relaxed, much more different than I knew her before." (Ludmila, adolescent leader)

"*It was good that the themes and activities came from us, the young generation. They listened to us differently than if the adults had come up with ideas.*" (Antonina, teen leader)

"*I think it was better that we initiated. We were taken more seriously as adults. At least, that's how I see it. We can talk to children differently, we understand each other better, and they have an easier time trying to understand us than adults. On the other hand, [...] we can also say differently to adults; we can convey the voice of children differently. It's more authentic.*" (Milana, teen leader)

"*No, I haven't heard of anyone who has questioned why we children did what we did.*" (Ludmila, teen leader)

4.7. Impact on family and community

Young respondents believe that in communities where there is no discussion about the impact, positive or negative, of parents going abroad to work, youth social action using artistic methods can act as an ice-breaker in the school and/or housing community, followed by direct and concrete discussions, debates and debates on strategies to improve the well-being of children in transnational families.

"*It is so commonplace that we almost do not notice it. It is not an issue because everyone complains. Almost everyone is in the same situation. If there is no money, no job, adults have to go, and then what do we talk about?*" (Mihai, co-researcher)

was one explanation given by an adolescent co-researcher from Moldova, now living in Romania, for why people in the community do not speak seriously about the adversities related to migration and why people do not listen to the pain of the children left behind.

Social actions carried out according to the principles of participatory action research create a friendly, supportive atmosphere in which opinions can be expressed, and experiences and feelings can be shared without labelling or blaming, which helps to facilitate one crucial protective factor: community cohesion (Chai et al. 2018).

For many, the opportunity provided by the YouCreate methodology was the first time they had spoken openly with their parents, parents with their children or someone else about their experiences of physical distance between

them, and the discussions were accompanied by emotions that were often intense.

> *"The parents had tears in their eyes. But it was good, it was very touching. Parents cried and laughed with their children as they worked together."* (Ludmila, teen leader)

> *"She told me that I was the first person with whom she could talk so openly and honestly about her feelings."* (Diana, teen leader)

> *"Those with parents away were happy that someone had thought about how they were feeling, and the others were confused because they had no idea how hard it is not to have parents with you."* (Estera, team member)

There were also several positive reactions to sharing the results:

> *"The news about the poster at the bus station spread, and people came from the neighbouring villages to say that they would like to have it too. The mayor replied that they could only do it if they had the budget for it."* (Corina, trainer, researcher).

> *"There were those who wanted to buy the paintings exhibited. But we couldn't sell them. They have a special emotional value for us, and we didn't talk about it with our colleagues, children and adults who contributed. We didn't think about it. We couldn't sell them."* (Milana, teen leader)

4.8. Recommendations made by the participants

Regarding actions initiated and led by teenagers, all respondents agree that this type of youth involvement is essential and necessary. Reflecting on their initiatives in the CASTLE project, respondents' own experience reinforces the view that children and adolescents face the challenges of parental migration differently from adults. They believe that their approaches in studies and community actions are complementary to the adult approaches.

> *"I think it was all good. I liked it, but if we were to continue, this activity should also be implemented in schools, for example, as part of an education lesson."* (A., youth leader)

> *"We shouldn't change anything. Let's continue. Let's carry on."* (Ludmila, youth leader)

4.9. Challenges

In working with adolescents, involving them in many activities and overloading them with school activities and responsibilities is a serious challenge. The problem was not a lack of motivation and overload with tasks. For this reason, there were situations in which some members were absent for a longer period or retired and needed to be replaced.

Harmonising project activities with school responsibilities was more manageable for those who chose to work with the school community. Here, teachers were more informed and involved (even if they did not actively participate, they knew about the project).

> *"They let us out of class. If we had something to organise."* (Laura, teen leader)

Another challenge was the limited budget, which severely restricted the opportunities for young people to express themselves through artistic elements. This was compounded by a lot of work that was 'invisible' in the budget.

> *"Often, the amount of work and effort that goes into these programmes is not seen. Both by the children, who are very committed and motivated, and by the teachers or other adults who support them. Preparing and carrying through is much work until you get the visible result. That you have a painting, large, I don't even know exactly how... 3 x 2.5 metres, outside, and you can't continue because the first coat of paint doesn't dry because it's raining and your plans are ruined..."* (Corina, trainer, researcher)

5. Conclusions

Reducing the undesirable, harmful effects of parental absence, strengthening supportive factors, and improving resilience should be a priority for researchers, practitioners and policymakers for the well-being of left-behind children.

For children, the presence of a caring adult is critical for successfully coping with challenges (Zimmerman et al. 2013). The adult-child relationship is supportive when the adult can effectively treat the child or adolescent as a partner, listening, involving them in decisions, and providing readily available and concrete support, regardless of age. The presence of such adults in the community (within and outside the family) and good peer and neighbour relationships are necessary to increase the child's social trust, which is closely linked to the mental health of the children left behind (Wang 2023).

YouCreate is a promising programme to enhance the well-being of left-behind children and their environment. The use of artistic methods to help the adolescents present themselves authentically and the joint creation and celebration of artwork helped to create a family atmosphere in the team and the community. The adolescents identified the latter as one of the project's main benefits. The empowerment-based, resilience-focused methodology helped the teenagers develop and implement their programmes according to their realistic needs and resources, respecting their limits. This way, they could exercise their agency and develop leadership, organisational, advocacy and social skills.

Also contributing to the empowerment of young people were a sense of belonging; a reduction in the distance between adults (teachers, institutional representatives, community members) and teenagers, a more personal bond; a sense of usefulness and recognition by others; and a sense of helping others (children left at home, younger children).

In addition, the results of the present project show that it is essential to bear in mind that the presence of resilience factors (healthy self-expression, age-appropriate care, development of family, school and neighbourhood care, development of peer support) moderates but does not replace the absence of parents (Wang 2023). Awareness of this helps to set realistic expectations and to create an environment where children can express painful or ambivalent feelings (e.g. many children have a strong desire to have their parents by their side, even if they understand and accept the parent's decision - a telling example is the "welcome home" sign made by children at the village bus stop).

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