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“NOT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE”? TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES’ RELATIONSHIP IN THEIR HOME SOCIETY – BETWEEN STIGMA AND DIALOGUE¹

The study discusses whether and how Ukrainian and Moldovan migrant parents, some of whom had to leave their children behind in the care of other adults, are faced with a disapproving public discourse while also facing strong pressure both in their relationship with the public authorities and at the level of society, community, and family. Through this approach, we aim to answer the following question: Are Ukrainian and Moldavian transnational family members subjected to a process of stigmatization at the level of society and their immediate social environment? In this view, we develop a qualitative inquiry based on in-depth interviews with respondents from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Our main research objective is to examine the attitudes encountered by members of transnational families in society, their relations with the representatives of the authorities, as well as in their close social environment, community, and family. Specific research topics are explored, such as reasons for migration, trust in public authorities, local community, migrants’ community, trust in the host country’s state and society, the attitudes towards the most important key stakeholders involved in the migration process, as well as the support measures proposed by migrants and their families. The findings concerning the attitudes, level of trust, and proposals suggest the presence of a certain degree of stigmatization of parents from transnational families. Our study underlines the need for transnational transfer of good practices and real-life experiences, such as those of migrants, to not remain an empty imitation. This experience can only be transferred through dialogue, trust, and acceptance – which is not the case at the time of our research. Therefore, it is imperative to continue dialogue-based fieldwork with primary stakeholders, the families themselves, to deconstruct and prospectively avoid the structural construction of stigma.

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“НЕ ТАКІ, ЯК ВСІ”? ВІДНОСИНИ ТРАНСНАЦІОНАЛЬНИХ СІМЕЙ З РІДНИМ СУСПІЛЬСТВОМ – МІЖ СТИГМОЮ ТА ДІАЛОГОМ

Показано, як українські та молдовські батьки-мігранти, які вимушені були залишити своїх дітей без батьківського піклування, стикаються з негативним публічним ставленням, а також потужним тиском у відносинах з боку органів державної влади, суспільства, громади й родини. За допомогою цього підходу ми прагнемо відповісти на запитання: чи зазнають члени українських і молдовських транснаціональних сімей стигматизації на рівні суспільства, а також їхнього найближчого соціального оточення? З огляду на це, проведено якісне дослідження за допомогою глибинних інтерв'ю з респондентами з України та Республіки Молдова. Головна мета нашого дослідження – вивчити ставлення, з яким стикаються члени транснаціональних сімей у суспільстві, у відносинах з представниками влади, а також у своєму найближчому соціальному оточенні, громаді та родині. Порушено такі теми дослідження: причини міграції, довіра до органів державної влади, місцевої громади, спільноти мігрантів і держави та суспільства приймаючої країни, ставлення до найважливіших стейкхолдерів, залучених до міграційного процесу, а також заходи підтримки, запропоновані мігрантами та їхніми родинами. Висновки щодо ставлення, рівня довіри та пропозицій свідчать про наявність певного ступеня стигматизації батьків з транснаціональних сімей. Дослідження підкреслює необхідність транснаціональної передачі передового досвіду та досвіду реального життя, зокрема мігрантів, щоб не залишатися пустою імітацією. Цей досвід можна передати лише через діалог, довіру та прийняття, чого не було на момент нашого дослідження. Тому вкрай важливо продовжувати польову роботу за допомогою діалогу з основними зацікавленими сторонами, самими сім'ями, щоб надалі уникнути стигми.

Ключові слова: транснаціональні сім'ї, ставлення, довіра, стигма, Україна, Республіка Молдова.

In the literature dealing with migration issues, researchers have addressed the negative perceptions towards parents who migrate and leave their children in the care of others. As studies have shown, the attitudes present in public discourse towards transnational family members are often negative [1–8].

Regarding the interest of our endeavour, focused on parents' situation in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, recent studies show that the public discourses about migration that emphasize merely the negative consequences on children left behind (CLB) must be reconsidered [8]. Approaching the situation of children with migrant parents exclusively from the perspective of 'social orphans', a syntagm that has dominated the Ukrainian media, is inadequate and fails to open the door to a real dialogue between stakeholders, transnational families, and authorities. As Lutz (2017) notes, any positive perspective on the CLB debate is completely absent. Similarly, in Moldova, studies and consultative reports by several NGO organizations (e.g., UNICEF) have largely focused on children from vulnerable communities, contributing to constructing a negative discourse against transnational families. This image almost completely ignores the contemporary realities of family existence, which are often, to a large extent, interconnected with migration and care systems [9, p. 118].

Along these lines, our study discusses whether and how Ukrainian and Moldovan migrant parents, some of whom had to leave their children behind in the care of other adults, are faced with a disapproving public discourse while also facing strong pressure both in their relationship with the public authorities and at the level of society, community, and family. More specifically, through this approach, we aim to answer the following question: *Are Ukrainian and Moldavian transnational families members subjected to a process of stigmatization at the level of society and their immediate social environment?* To answer this question, we developed a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with respondents from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova with data collected in 2021².

Our main research objective is to examine the attitudes encountered by members of transnational families in society, their relations with the representatives of the authorities, but also in their close social environment, community, and family. Specific research topics are explored, including reasons for migration, trust in public authorities, local community, migrants' community, and trust in the host country's state and society, the attitudes towards the most important key stakeholders involved in the migration process, as well as the support measures proposed by migrants and their families.

Family-state relationship. An analysis of the attitudes that members of transnational families encounter in everyday life, both in the country of origin and the host country, cannot disregard a brief presentation of the family-state relationship in the case of the two countries, Ukraine and Moldova.

Following the demise of the communist regime, the neoliberal economic reforms from the early 1990s in the former Soviet republics were inconsistent and incomplete. Instead of creating a functioning market economy, they tore down social guarantees and undermined social security [10]. The transition from communism was also accompanied by the population's impoverishment [11]. Moreover, Ukraine faced a sharpening decline starting from 2014, on the background of the Crimea annexation and military conflict in the east of the country, with a period of austerity that undoubtedly affected the well-being of families

² While acknowledging the devastating impact of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine for the society as a whole and the immensely disruptive bearing of war on families with children, the study does not address the specificity of the post-invasion circumstances.

and children, especially women’s working and living conditions, as well as gender relations [12]. Extending outside the European Union context the classification proposed by Saraceno & Keck [13], it can be argued that both Ukraine and Moldova are familial by default in terms of distribution of the intergenerational responsibilities towards vulnerable family members, with neither publicly provided alternatives to nor financial support for family care. Post-communist Moldova was characterized by lower GDP expenditure on social protection, a high degree of familiarization, and segmented and often inefficient family policies [14], a description that would fit Ukraine as well. As a result, both Moldova and Ukraine possess a weak social security system with significant social security challenges [14; 15].

While both countries faced harsh economic circumstances in the transition period, the emphasis on family values was more powerful in Ukraine than in Moldova. The family was a central issue on the political agenda of nation-building of post-Soviet Ukraine. If, during communism, the state had a powerful controlling function over the family, the *Draft for a State Family Policy* adopted by the Ukrainian parliament in 1999 stated the main principles of the state-family relationship. Zhurzhenko describes the first principle as “the sovereignty and autonomy of the family while minimizing the interference of the state and self-administration bodies, political parties, public organizations and religion” [10, p. 192]. At the same time, the family has an important “role in the nation-building process, which consists of contributions to the continuity of the generations and of passing on national and cultural traditions, values and customs to the children” (from the *Draft for a State Family Policy, 1999*) [10, p. 192]. The family was transformed into a symbol of national revival, referring to stable marriage and high birth rates as fundamental to the Ukrainians [10]. Scholars link this pressure to keep young families together with mature mothers and grandmothers as the most suitable household members for migration [16]. On the other hand, the worse economic prospects in the home country lead Moldovans to oversee the pressure to keep families together at home and consequently, younger women are more present as migrants than in Ukraine [16].

Against this background, in societies with a post-soviet legacy, the state-family relationship, particularly in the context of migration, became one of the most problematic relationships. On the public agenda, the subject of migrants was approached predominantly economically, like the Romanian situation approximately 20 years ago. When the issue of parents, and especially mothers, going abroad to work was raised, they were blamed for leaving their children, and a defamation process began [7]. The denigration in the public discourse, especially of migrant mothers, who are perceived as responsible for the family's well-being and, therefore, of the children, has been pointed out by authors interested in the research of transnational families [7; 17; 18]. Parreñas [19] and Ducu [7] focus their attention on how migrant mothers in Romania have been done a great injustice by the way the public discourse at the time portrayed them; this discourse emphasized the negative side of the migration process because of which children are left behind alone in their country of origin. Ducu demonstrates how the negative perception is, to a certain extent, present at all levels of Romanian society: macro (public discourse), meso (of the community of origin), and micro (within one's own family) [7, pp. 87–96]. During the 2000s, when migration,

especially that of women, became particularly widespread, the expressions 'social orphans' (Ukraine) and *de facto* abandonment (Romania) [3] also appeared in the media discourse when discussing children left behind. In Ukraine and Romania, mothers were seen as responsible for family issues and were often accused in the public discourse of abandoning their children and breaking up families by their departure. This type of discourse overlooks details regarding the *reasons for migration*. These women often had no other solution to provide for their children's everyday lives, and they left precisely for their children's futures. Women in post-communist countries became migrant breadwinners for their families, supporting their children and out-of-job husbands during the harsh transition phase and equally difficult economic times that followed [16]. This same discourse seems to completely ignore the visible improvement in the quality of life of these families and their communities, including the cases of extremely poor and vulnerable communities where the migration process has produced considerable improvements in the standard of living [20].

Reasons for migration in difficult economic circumstances. The complex transformations prompted by the dismantling of communist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union are essential in understanding the migration propensity and practice in Central and Eastern Europe [21]. While the break from communism facilitated the highly valued freedom of travel [22], the transition period also brought about economic shortages and labour market volatility, turning migration abroad into a viable option for part of the population [23]. As various constraints of personal or procedural nature may discourage permanent relocation in a host country, short-term migration and repeated temporary travel back and forth became feasible strategies for improving households' earnings through working abroad [24; 25].

Both Moldova and Ukraine went through remarkable economic difficulties that extended well beyond the transition period; as such, economic drivers of migratory behaviour are a consistent finding as far as the two countries are concerned.

For Moldova, data collected in 2012 demonstrates the driving factors of labour migration: 76,8% of respondents who left the country in search of work abroad indicated "low wages" as the primary reason for leaving, 8,8% referred to "lack of matching qualification/skills in Moldova", whereas 6% signalled the "poor working conditions" [26, p. 24]. More recent accounts confirm the persistence of economic difficulties in the Moldovan context. Inserting into the labour market seems particularly challenging for women and young people. Women participate less than the general population in the labour market – in 2019, the rate of labour force participation for women was 38,2%, compared to 42,3% in the general work-age population [27]. As far as young people are concerned, their efforts are hindered by "scarce and low-quality employment opportunities, a difficult school-to-work transition, and high risk of discouragement" [27, p. 11]. It is therefore not surprising that young people represent a large portion of the Moldovan workers abroad – 40%, according to data collected in 2016 [28]. Given the unfavourable labour environment back home, the economic motivations of migration continue to prevail. Data from a 2019 survey among Moldovan migrants reveal that labour market-related reasons (availability of jobs and/or better salaries) are indicated by 80% of respondents [29].

The Ukrainian case provides a comparable picture of discontent with the domestic economic environment, which turns temporary work abroad into a frequent practice [30].

While economic reasons are reported to be the key drivers among Ukrainian migrants, low salaries rather than unemployment are the main cause of the decision to go abroad [31; 32]. Assessing the remuneration level available in Ukraine by comparing it to earnings accessible in other countries seems indeed a decisive aspect; Pieńkowski mentions the findings from a 2017 survey that revealed “difference in salary levels” [33, p. 18] to be the primary motivation indicated by 84% of labour migrants from Ukraine. Apart from the precarious level of salaries, an additional factor that prompts people to search for better opportunities abroad is the perceived “lack of stability of earnings in Ukraine” [31, p. 37]. Recent assessments of the labour environment in Ukraine highlight the low level of wages relative to the European context and the existence of a comparative disadvantage for women, both in terms of employment and level of remuneration [34].

The typical pattern of labour migration from the two countries, whereby solely some members of the household work abroad, turns money transfers to the country of origin into a meaningful form of assistance for families back home. Along these lines, remittances are an important economic support mechanism for Moldova and Ukraine [29; 33; 35].

Trust in public authorities in the context of migration. It is not a scientific novelty that mistrust in institutions and the political system was often associated with the old Soviet regime of the states in question [36; 37]. A chronic deficit of trust in state institutions is characteristic of both Moldova and Ukraine [38; 39]. The state and its related authorities are intermediaries in parental concerns about families left at home and the public support they should receive. This care is expected from authorities that have faced blockages in the transition to a democratic system designed to support citizens, not to intervene in them. This transformation phase from communism to liberalism has brought numerous cleavages of trust between individuals, political systems and society. Where did mistrust come from? The old regime remained prevailing through economic, institutional and social instability; citizens' expectations did not reach quick results, and the system was strongly corrupt through the weak applicability of laws and justice; so as a result, public sentiments were and are still characterized by suspicion, reluctance and passivity [40].

Currently, there are questions about whether generalized trust makes democracy work or makes democracy work better [41] and whether it is associated with government performance [42]. Many claim that institutions that do not perform satisfactorily for individual tasks tend to be untrustworthy [43; 44]. Actions and satisfactory support for individuals determine their well-being, which is closely related to the trust. Offe asserted that trust is the belief that the action or inaction of others will contribute to someone else's well-being [45]. More specifically, trust is based on individuals' expectations of others regarding their contribution or their forbearance from various actions that may or not affect the well-being of the holder of those expectations or a relevant community.

Data and methods. The data for the present study were collected in Moldova and Ukraine. During 2021, the project's first year, 102 semi-structured interviews, 10 focus group discussions with adults and children from transnational families and caregivers and 24 interviews with experts from local and national authorities and NGOs were collected.

The concept of the CASTLE action³ uses a standpoint epistemology, namely, trying to “struggle, process, relate through relations, in them and out of them, in dialogue and learning with” [46] respondents/stakeholders. Therefore, family members’ and experts’ responses are to be viewed as representing their standpoints and put into dialogue through effective relationships within collaborative research. Therein, the action has involved participants in joint sessions for the co-creation of interview guides, interviewing with the involvement of co-researchers and focus-group discussions where the primary results of interviews were fed back.

Findings. In this part, we aim to show how in the context of migration, members of transnational families are exposed both by society and by representatives of the authorities, but also in the closer environment, at a more intimate level, to a certain pressure that adds to the one they already experienced in the migration process. Analysis of the motivation for migration and the decision to leave children behind in the care of other adults, the attitudes that transnational family members encounter in their daily lives at macro and micro levels, the level of trust our respondents have in the state and their immediate environment, but also the support measures proposed by migrants we believe will illustrate that these families are constantly exposed to external pressure that can often be likened to a stigmatization process.

The reasons behind migration. The interviews with adult members of transnational families revealed that migration decisions generally revolve around economic aspects. Both the scarcity of employment opportunities and the discouraging wages in the home countries are conducive to periods of working abroad. While the explicit economic grounds of migration are a common thread for most interviewees, interesting nuances are discernible within respondents’ accounts as they explain the attempt to overcome their financial shortages.

When speaking about their decision to leave, respondents frequently refer to labour migration being a widespread practice and a direct response to unfavourable economic conditions at home. For example, a 22 years old migrant mother bitterly describes:

“That’s why people leave the country because there are few jobs, you don’t have anywhere to work, there’s no work ... you can’t support yourself in Moldova” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Italy).

Seeing their path as one of the many similar trajectories within their community, respondents acknowledge, apart from financial shortages as the driving motive, a shared concern among migrants for securing a better future for their families:

“Like everybody else – the financial means. For a better living, for a better life, for our children’s future, that is... I think anyone, everyone around here when they go abroad, they leave with this thought – for a better future” (man, Republic of Moldova, works in Ireland).

³ Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU), ICMPD/2021/MPF-357-004, co-funded by the European Union, contracted by International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) through the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), hosted by the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, partners: Terre des Hommes Switzerland, Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, Moldovan Academy of Economic Studies, Ukrainian Institute for Social Research after Olexander Yaremenko.

Moreover, while highlighting the unexceptional nature of supplementing a family’s deficient income by working abroad (since so many others do the same), some respondents insist that the choice to work in a different country is not a matter of preference but of necessity alone:

“Money is not enough And the man – he would rather work here. He is a patriot, but he is leaving because this is the situation. Not only here, but all our neighbours earn money abroad to support their families because there is not enough money” (woman, Ukraine, whose husband works abroad).

Since respondents come from families with children, their attempt to improve the financial resources of their household is highly motivated by providing the young ones with a life without shortages. This often means that families will sacrifice, temporarily, their physical togetherness in the attempt to build a more secure life:

“To be honest, we don't want to, but we have to [leave]. It is what it is ... with these price rises, we have to make a living. We have three children, we have to give them a future, we are doing our best, tearing ourselves apart, one here and one there” (man, Republic of Moldova, recently worked in Germany);

“If we lived on public salaries, we usually did not have enough money, and as children grow up, the needs of our family increase; as the man [husband] went to work, you can make ends meet a little” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Czech Republic).

Families’ needs change and often expand with the arrival of a new member. These changes sometimes coincide with deteriorating economic conditions outside the parents’ control. In such circumstances, supplementing the income through temporary work abroad becomes a feasible strategy for getting by:

“[...] We started building a new house, somehow there was not enough money for everything, but ... already after 2015, problems with salaries began. I had a small salary at school – \$200 and my wife \$200. The second child has already arrived. The salary was no longer enough [...] I originally wanted [to stay] for 3 months and then no longer go abroad. You come home, you sit there for a month or two, and the money is already spent” (man, Ukraine, works in Germany).

The decision to work abroad, even temporarily, will alter the ordinary lives of families through periods of separation between children and at least one of their parents. Migrant parents are aware of this and carry the burden of distance while at the same time pondering the difficult trade-off between financial shortage and improvements that inevitably bring a transitory absence:

“Leaving has its advantages and disadvantages: if you stay, you’re with the family, but you’re struggling financially; if you leave, you earn money, but you’re far from your family” (woman, Republic of Moldova, her husband works in Germany).

Not being near one’s children is unquestionably a situation that parents would prefer to avoid. Some of the respondents are very keen to emphasize the importance of children and parents being together while acknowledging that difficult economic circumstances often prevent this from happening:

“[T]he root cause is the low wages here in Ukraine [...] the children needed mom and dad to be around, but in our life, it doesn’t work out the way we want, so ... Either I had to work, or her” (man, Ukraine, whose wife works in Poland);

“Every mother and father would like to stay with their child, with the family, at home... [but] to be able to support the family, one of the parents has to leave” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works together with her husband in Italy).

Sometimes, parents' long-term migration plans are long-term, and bringing their children to the host country is an integral part of their intentions. In such circumstances, the decision to leave includes but is not limited to seeking alleviation of financial shortage; rather, at stake is improved quality of life and better educational prospects for children. Some plans are not successful at the first attempt, like in the case of a Ukrainian family:

“We, leaving for Spain, still pursued not only the goal of earning money but also simply as social security. Maybe even better education in schools for children, so that they learn in a more different way, let's say. I mean, that was the goal” (woman, Ukraine, returned with her husband from Spain several years ago).

Other projects are still ongoing and involve, at least for a while, the separation between parents and children; yet the goal remains that of getting settled, together with their children, in the host country, where better opportunities can be accessed:

“It is very difficult to live in Moldova. [...] We decided to take the children [to Germany] so they can study, have a future, so they won't end up working like my husband, and myself do now...” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works together with her husband in Germany).

Attitudes. In this section, we focus our analysis on the narratives of those directly involved in the migration process members of transnational families, those who migrate and those who stay behind as caregivers for the children, as well as representatives of authorities and NGOs. We focused on the interview data attempting to capture the main perspectives of the interviewees on how society and the community is treating and looking at migrants. What are the attitudes towards these families at different levels, and what do they tell us about the families' situation and how are they perceived by society, the community, or their own families?

1. Community and society attitudes. The idea that family is responsible for their well-being appears throughout respondents' statements, either referring to motives for migration, existing or potential benefits, or attitudes of support and appreciation from the community or society. Under these circumstances, it appears natural that in their home country, migrants and caretakers receive support and appreciation from family members, especially in managing the care of their children, following the familial of Ukrainian and Moldovan societies. Other actors appear in connection with the educational context of their children—kindergarten teacher, class teacher or the school principal.

“There is a lot of support from schoolteachers. Moral support, from “don't worry, everything will be fine”, they even tried to improve the child's emotional state” (woman, Ukraine, works in Czech Republic).

Migrants report a good collaboration with them, pointing towards a common endeavour to monitor children's school performance. Less often, they mention persons from the city hall or Child Protection Services as supportive. However, in many instances, a good and supportive relationship with the teacher or the city hall's social worker relies on establishing a good/close connection with them prior to migration.

“[...] I called the school principal because she was a former teacher of mine, so she knew my son very well; I communicated with the class teacher, too” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Italy);

“The lady [from the Child Protection Service] knew. I knew her. She was an acquaintance [...], and I told her I’m leaving...” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Italy).

Attitudes from the people in their community are, however, diverse:

“Radically different. There is compassion, there is envy, someone can and condemns. There is no unanimous approval or condemnation” (man, Ukraine, works in Poland);

“[...] there are people who have a negative attitude to it, that is, they do not understand that you leave the family, that sometimes you are in another country, so different people relate in different ways to this” (man, Ukraine, works in Poland);

“I mean, envy is also very big in people. But they don’t understand one thing, that is, that any man who has gone abroad, he has not gone back willingly and gone there to sit and wait... [...]” (man, Republic of Moldova, works in Poland).

Under community pressure, it is not uncommon to experience self-blame. This is triggered by the inability to provide for one’s children and the shame attached to being unable to provide for them daily. This produces a projection of community and societal expectations if you have children, you should be able to support them, and if you are not, it is a shame; it is your fault:

“And so I closed my eyes and went out into the world, into the big world, so that I could have something to live on, something to support the children because I was ashamed to sit with my hand outstretched and when someone gave me the help I blushed because I didn’t like to give myself help. That’s how I thought: Oh, if God gave me three children, I have to work to support them” (woman, Republic of Moldova, caregiver for three grandchildren, daughter and daughter-in-law work abroad).

2. Trust and attitudes toward institutional stakeholders. In order to have a comprehensive image of the attitudes towards parents from transnational families, we believe that the illustration regarding the *level of trust* that these families’ members have in the authorities representing the state (Moldova and Ukraine but also the receiving states), the NGO environment as well as the level of trust in their close environment, family and community, plays an important role.

Trust is not always divided only at the macro level, namely the level of authorities and the state. Trust (‘ingroup trust’) is the confidence that can be shared between close people such as family members, friends, or acquaintances. Particular or personalized trust is typical for those who only have faith in their kind of people [47]. People who are considered your type of people usually share the same beliefs, a common past, common experiences, perspectives or opinions, and traditions as yours. Our subjects from each of the groups, Ukrainian and Moldovan, share a kind of the same life course, similar transnational experiences, and the same past political context, making them resonate with each other, so intuitively, we can say that they share traces of trust. Following this point of view, it is essential to mention that individuals who share situations of mutual uncertainty [48] in economic relationships [49] in their attempt to get out of them develop a mutual relationship of trust intended to be continued on mutually beneficial terms [50].

This also emerges from the discussions with the interviewees, through their awareness that they are part of a group with the same concerns and disappointments concerning their living conditions:

“We have to be aware of the fact that Moldova is a poor country, no one will give them money and no matter how much you give them, I don't know if they will meet the needs... people leave because of the need to earn...” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Austria);

“We need help from the state so that the salary is normal and there is something to live on. Not to go. We are here for a better living. We are patriots. We are good in our country, but there would be something to live on” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Germany).

Individuals, in general, must have the feeling that trustworthy institutions are those that represent them. Thus, these must contribute by meeting their expectations. The main key to this exchange of trust and interest representation is communication. According to the respondents' statements, there were superficial and discriminatory treatments towards the members of the transnational families by the members of the social service, for example:

“In the social service, they told me straight to the face: “your family left to earn money, so we won't give you anything.” Like this. That is how you solve it? (...) And I was left alone with the children. Where can I get, where can I look for help? Here is the state. I went to the state, and they are moving the arrows” (man, Ukraine, his wife works in Poland).

It has been shown over time that countries with a high level of corruption have low generalized trust [51]. We find this connection in our discussions; some of the respondents agree that corruption causes their lack of trust:

“For some reason, you trust the police there, more than the police at home. Because of this corruption, that's all - it causes mistrust. And I want a more confident shoulder from this side, the state” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Spain).

Feelings of insecurity and reluctance towards state authorities are, in general, causes of distrust. According to the statements from the interviews, there is reticence and hostility in Ukraine, less in Moldova, regarding the institutional evidence of minors, current legal framework and support from the state. For Ukrainians, this attitude is linked with the desire that the state will not intervene, and that society will not accuse them:

“I don't know, but I wouldn't want someone to take my child into the record either” (man, Republic of Moldova, works in Belgium);

“No, it is not known, and I say that I think it would sound in those comments from people: “How do they still have benefits, for what?”. I would be ashamed of Ukraine, and I don't work there. I just bring money for the cycle and don't take anything else, just so that they don't tax us, give us peace, and that's it. We would not take anything, let them give to those who need it” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Poland).

The criticism expressed towards the non-existent, inefficient, or explicitly anti-migrant measures by state authorities highlights another source of mistrust, both in Moldova and Ukraine:

“We no longer believe and do not hope for the country. We rely only on ourselves, and generally, this is not normal. You should feel that someone needs you, but here it is: no one needs you” (man, Ukraine, works in Germany);

“They don't give any material support because I know that if someone is abroad and sends money home, it also takes away the social assistance they have [...] They don't give help; on the contrary, they take it out” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Portugal).

Along with criticism, some respondents refer to practices encountered in their host countries or elsewhere as examples:

“Even if migrant workers are not paid, there is a condition that you have to register, and the state already knows about you. Isn't that a certain level of trust in you? You came, we want to know about you. We trust you to some extent. You as a person, knowing this, such an attitude, you also will entrust to some extent your life, your future, your work to the state where you came” (Ukraine, expert, national NGO);

“I tell you, what hurts me a lot is: why does a foreign state help the children of the Republic of Moldova? Why do the Italians help a lot of the children of the Republic of Moldova, the socially vulnerable families, but why does not our Moldovan State help its children? Being on the territory of Moldova, I could not succeed at all” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Italy).

When discussing the authorities' attitude and how the state supports them over time, interviewees often reveal a lack of support from the state authorities. On the other side, when representatives of the authorities are asked about the situation of transnational families, a wide range of reactions is often brought to the surface, from understanding and emphasizing the importance of providing help, to prejudices, to the need to sanction them by imposing taxes and to blame the mothers in particular:

“In principle, to go for \$800 to Poland, if you can get \$500–600 here, it just doesn't make sense, except to look for, forgive me, a break from family, from family responsibilities somewhere; forgive me, but we have another explanation that they did not find themselves. Because when you have the opportunity to earn normal money here or in the region but spend a much larger amount in Poland or another country to pay for your accommodation your food, one cannot understand the purpose of that trip. This is not labour migration than” (Ukraine, expert, local administration);

“In the district [...] there are not dozens but hundreds of such families who had to go abroad leaving their children and parents behind, and we even have localities where almost half of the women have gone abroad, the children being left in the care of their grandparents, who are old and who cannot help them to prepare for classes and are unable to supervise them while they are free, outside of school” (Republic of Moldova, expert, local administration).

In the discourse of the representatives of the authorities, parents seem to be responsible for the situation created and the problems that arise. Moreover, when looking for solutions, the authorities often resort to authoritarian scenarios: financial penalties. The solutions of setting up dedicated centres for these children are also mentioned, while it seems to be overlooked that many of these children remain in the care of a close family member: grandparents, parents' siblings.

3. Attitudes towards other transnational families – attitudes towards others like you. Respondents are aware of different situations and degrees of vulnerability of transnational families. Consequently, they display an understanding attitude towards other transnational

families where more problematic situations may have been in place and argue that in those cases, some form of help – financial or psychological – must be provided:

“I think that there is still such a need, there are different families, and probably there are different situations, when probably dad and mom are abroad, grandma and grandpa stay there, maybe they do not always have the opportunity to raise that child, and as far as we have heard, and it is clear that there are problems, especially in adolescence, that is, I think it should be supported from the school, from some social services there, it should have been” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Poland);

“For them [migrants] and the children, I mean the children that remain home and those who leave ... this leaves a negative impact, in my opinion... Especially, I can imagine, for those who are left in need, because of the lack of money” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Austria).

Respondents in both Ukraine and Moldova advise other migrant parents not to leave the children behind when both the mother and father leave but to take them abroad:

“But what I don't like is when parents leave, and children are left alone. You need to take children with you; clearly, you will not earn so much money, you will not feel that way, you need an apartment, but you will be with the children” (woman, Ukraine, returned from Portugal many years ago);

“I would recommend, if anyone decides to leave abroad, it mandatory to take the children with them or at least one parent to stay at home, but if it is to leave, it mandatory to take the children, because each beginning is hard, with or without children” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Italy);

“I'm still telling other parents to maybe hear me, to let their children come with them, that's the best, and to be together as a family” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works together with her husband in Germany).

What the interviews reveal are the different generations' attitudes. Maria is a woman who, at 48 years old, more than 20 years ago, was compelled to migrate to support her family, leaving behind three children and a husband unable to work. In her opinion, this has brought about many changes in her family's life, and she says she now feels she has lost those years of her children's lives. But when she talks about mothers and migration, she emphasizes the losses that women have experienced because of migration:

“I believe that for our women, they have gained materially but lost in terms of their relationships with their children. They've lost all or half” (woman, Republic of Moldova, worked in Italy for more than 20 years).

This discourse is often shared among women who migrated in the earliest period when the whole process was much more burdensome – little money, weak information networks, poor circulation of information, access to different means of communication and keeping in touch with those back home was also less frequent (once a month or less often) involved higher costs. In contrast, those involved in migration currently benefit from much greater openness, access to various means of communication and maintaining contact daily, even several times a day, which facilitates the maintenance of a close communication relationship with children, a new way of being together [52].

4. Attitudes in/and about the host societies. Because their departure is motivated by fragile employment and earning prospects, some migrants consider that being offered better-paid jobs is helpful enough on behalf of the destination country, while the rest lies in the individual's responsibility:

"[...] I don't know what they could do... [...] They offered you a job already, from now on it's up to you, whether you afford to bring your family or not..." (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Austria);

"For the rest, you manage it yourself, how you know, how you can ... We [the state in destination country] offered you a lot, we organized work for you, we did this ..., there are kindergartens, there are different other activities [services], but from further on, you manage it by yourself" (man, Republic of Moldova, works in Ireland).

Migrants have a negative attitude towards the state in their home countries, where they deplore mainly the lack of opportunities and prospects for a better life, which materialized in a lack of decent-paid jobs. Coming from weak welfare states, neither Ukrainians nor Moldovans cannot think of social support beyond essential services. They are grateful for the jobs and for the occasional appreciation of their hard work:

"They know we work very much and very hard ... we do very hard things: what a tractor could do, we do with our hands ... [...] They know that our situation [in home country] is not that good" (man, Republic of Moldova, works in Germany).

The idea that in the other country, "you are nobody", and "nobody's" appears frequently. This part can be related to the kind of work migrants do (e.g., unskilled work that does not give him/her a status of prestige that is valued in the host society), to the lack of close family to relate to, to share, to belong to, and finally, it can reflect the way migrants are treated in the host countries:

"We are what there? Strangers to them. [...] We are there as they say, the servant of Germany. That's it. For them, this is what it counts: to work, to bring them income" (woman, Republic of Moldova, works together with her husband in Germany).

Although migrants acknowledge that sometimes they are shown:

"To be no one" there or treated badly at work, they consider that "to say that we are being pinched or oppressed here - no, it's good. If you have overcome the language barrier - it's great, as for the Poles. If you can't talk, yes, then you are treated worse if you don't know the language" (woman, Ukraine, works in Poland).

The same woman states: *"The treatment is cultural, good, but it is not written on you that you are a migrant"*.

The private nature of female transnational work in senior care in family households means almost permanent availability, with little enforcement of labour protection laws, even if they do apply [53]. Sometimes migrants find themselves in abusive situations but are unaware of workers' rights or unable to access some legal entitlements, given their non-EU and sometimes illegal status. Beyond the hard work and conditions, a 54 years old former domestic carer for an old disabled woman in Italy who calls her employers (the woman's children) "the masters" is proud of the positive appreciation of the old lady's acquisitions by the social worker who monitored her.

Support measures as suggested by respondents. Interestingly, the negative relationship between labour migrants' families and society at large, specifically the state, comes to the surface now of questioning the support measures proposed by the former and envisaged by the latter. Considering the above, we should think about the relationality reflected (quite explicitly) in the discourse when analysing the measures. This relationality is reflected in the epistemological standpoint of both and informs the proposals for support measures given. A pervasive deficit of trust in the state, political institutions, social organizations, and economic bodies, as presented by Kupets et al. [38] and attested by the data above, comes through at the level of proposals as well, these being epistemologically possible but practically weak.

1. Experts' proposals. Namely, experts are often empathetic to migrants and their families:

"They tried to revive something there, to release something else, but you can imagine that there was no work in three shifts, there was no stable payment, and where people had to go, and people had families, people had to take care of those families" (Ukraine, expert, national NGO).

At the same time, they speak from the perspective of their institutional position, with the vantage points and limits this offers. The vantage points consist of a much better knowledge of the situation:

"If you compared 5 years ago and 2 years ago, two years ago the wave of migration, I would say that went into decline because we have increased the average salary in the region and a significant number of vacancies" (Ukraine, expert, local employment agency).

Also, the knowledge comprises the appreciation of existing legislation and policy:

"Any package, any aid [at the local administration] that is given first and foremost, is given to children whose parents have gone abroad" (Republic of Moldova, expert, local administration), while also being aware of shortcomings:

"This is a vulnerable category because children are our future, and if we as people do not get informed and don't invest in their comfort in their education, then we have nowhere to expect a future. If leverage is not identified from the very beginning, it is then very difficult, and I think that it is necessary for this priority area" (Republic of Moldova, expert, national administration). Indeed, the respondents also display a capacity to offer constructive suggestions:

"[T]here are people who have gained relevant experience and can start a job here. enterprise, even social enterprise, because there is a lot of social business abroad. Create jobs here" (Ukraine, expert, local employment agency);

"It is necessary to organize extra-curricular activities for children (sports, creative), including attending creative centres, creative schools to have a higher involvement" (Republic of Moldova, expert, national administration);

"One proposal would be [that]... at the central level, legislation should be adjusted so that the responsibility of parents abroad is not lost" (Republic of Moldova, expert, local administration).

But this perspective has its practical limits, even limits of competence:

"I cannot specify, and now I give my advice, recommendations, I am not prepared" (Ukraine, expert, local administration).

The perspective of experts is, at the same time, entirely exterior to transnational families; hence they project a supposed lack of responsibility:

“It is necessary to tighten the legislation on the duties of migrant workers or their responsibility, and this will naturally raise the issue of a kind of register or database to understand who, what and how, what needs and what is the situation” (Ukraine, expert, national NGO).

2. Family members’ proposals. Conversely, migrant family members, as “experts by experience”, present critical perspectives about the institutional context of their migration. On one end, these manifest outright indignation about the state’s perceived passivity, indeed anti-migrant measures (such as the proposed taxation of remittances):

“[in Poland] there is a system of benefits. We don't have that, I don't know that we have one. They will not help us, they will drown us” (woman, Ukraine, works in Poland). On the other, they offer a soft and tolerant criticism:

“I don't know how to tell you. With the social service, I have such an idea about this organization that there should be some kind of help, but on their part ... they are looking for moments where something is wrong with you...” (man, Ukraine, his wife works in Poland).

In this situation, they mainly provide proposals that are often general or counterfactual – such as more jobs, more political support, and reduction of corruption:

“Maybe more jobs. Let the people have a place to work; that's why people leave the country because there are few jobs, you really don't have a place to work, there are not so many jobs, it's not even a job [...]” (woman, Republic of Moldova, works in Poland) or minimalist and defensive:

“Although, once G.R. ⁴arranged for us a free children's camp, in my opinion, in Feldman. Now that was helpful! And I also took vouchers for children to the sea, also for free. This is also social assistance, also G.R.” (man, Ukraine, his wife works in Poland);

“Legal advice is always needed because we are people who are not legally savvy, so we often encounter ignorance of the law, and free consultations would be very necessary” (man, Ukraine, his wife works in Poland);

“I would say that until the children are minors, there should be free travel” (woman, Ukraine, works in Poland).

In contrast, they point to their own foreign experiences, to how migrants are (positively) treated abroad: interpreters, migrant workers’ unions, better institutional communication, child monitoring, and migrant pensions, without finding definite corresponding measures to be implemented at home or transnationally:

“I don't know if there are any migrant workers' unions there. Here in Poland, yes. [...] This lawyer, as it were, and free travel – already helped me” (woman, Ukraine, works in Poland).

As argued by Ianioglo et al. [54] for the Moldovan case, the trust deficit of migrants towards institutions leads to a failure to apply to existing support mechanisms, which our data in the form of deep scepticism about such proposals can attest. Namely, transnational family members also highlight the epistemological scepticism to communicate effectively:

⁴ A person mentioned by the respondent; initials are used for anonymization.

“It is impossible to say. It’s all connected. It is impossible to say a few words, let’s do it, and everything will be fine. We are smart people. We understand that this is not real” (woman, Ukraine, works in Germany).

Dedicated measures in support of transnational families appear as dubitable as well since they might mean implicit discrimination:

“I think that a separate organization would humiliate me that we are not like everyone else” (woman, Ukraine, her husband works in Poland).

Indeed, this may lead to a renouncement of expectations:

“We no longer believe and rely on the country. We rely only on ourselves, and this is not normal. No one needs you, and the laws will not help us” (man, Ukraine, works in Germany).

Conclusions. We believe that migrants’ restraint in proposing more daring support measures is an expression of the full responsibility of the family for the well-being of its vulnerable members, in this case, the children. It is an outcome of a diminishing welfare state in post-socialist countries. A further explanation for the low-key nature of proposals may be rooted in how people assess authorities’ responsiveness and/or ability to deliver. Let us remember that both countries under discussion are characterized by low confidence in institutions, which is hardly an enabling context for people to imagine far-reaching interventions that public bodies would be willing to take on.

One of our concerns in this paper was identifying the causes of mistrust in the context of transnational families and their relationship with public authorities. After analyzing the data, we noticed that distrust results from specific indicators for Ukraine and Moldova: negativism built on perceptions of high corruption, lack of cooperation or poor communication, feelings of insecurity, reluctance, and hostility. Moreover, it is crucial to mention that transnationalism also brings the possibility of comparing the state care between the home and host countries. Mild forms of criticism were found through comparative opinions. Conversely, we believe that trust can be increased by: support measures aimed to support, not intervene in the family, positive interaction and efficient communication with representatives of institutions, transparency, less bureaucracy and more information on rights.

From all the sections that we have presented to best capture the practices that illustrate the presence of a certain degree of stigmatization of parents in transnational families, the inventory of all the stakeholders’ attitudes shows the highest ambivalence. However, this characteristic of attitudes illustrates the considerable pressure placed on transnational families by society, representatives of the authorities, and by members of the immediate social environment by the family and the community.

The findings concerning the level of trust, attitudes and proposals raise two important further issues. First, to inform the transnational transfer of good practices, real-life experience is needed, such as that of migrants, if it is not to remain a hollow imitation. However, this experience can only be conveyed through dialogue within conditions of trust and acceptance – which was not the case at the moment of our research. Second, the underlying biases in perspective, especially on the side of institutions, hinder the building of trust and are often lamentably also structurally reinforced by research [8; 55]. Therefore, it is imperative to continue dialogue-based fieldwork with primary stakeholders, the families themselves, to deconstruct and

prospectively avoid the structural construction of stigma - namely, the stigma inherent in the way the question itself is asked.

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