

RETURN MIGRATION AND THE ROLE OF DIASPORA IN STRENGTHENING DEMOGRAPHIC RESILIENCE: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: *"This paper examines return migration and the contribution of the diaspora to strengthening demographic resilience in the Republic of Moldova, against the backdrop of a continued population decline caused by intense outward migration. The theoretical framework integrates the transnational migration theory, human and social capital theories, and the concept of demographic resilience. Methodologically, the study combines, for the first time, the analysis of data on return migration with a public policy review conducted in 2024, based on content analysis of around 80 institutional reports and documents. The findings show that 93.4% of the negative migration balance in 2014-2023 was due to the emigration of Moldovan citizens, while only 6.6% resulted from the migration of foreign citizens. In certain years, population losses were partly offset by net inflows of Romanian and Russian citizens. Although Moldova has developed a comprehensive policy framework on return migration and diaspora engagement, the resources brought by these groups remain insufficiently harnessed to counteract the impact of mass emigration. Initiatives aimed at supporting youth economic empowerment and programmes targeting the professional diaspora remain limited in scope and do not systematically include those who have returned permanently. The most significant gap is the absence of a centralised mechanism for coordinating migration policies, compounded by weak inter-institutional communication."*

Keywords: *return migration, diaspora, migration policy, demographic resilience, Moldova*

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Republic of Moldova has experienced sustained waves of emigration, leading to pronounced demographic imbalances and growing concerns regarding population ageing, labor force depletion, and regional depopulation¹. In this context, return migration and the active engagement of the diaspora are increasingly viewed as potential levers for reinforcing economic and demographic sustainability. Returnees may contribute not only through human capital recovery, but also via new skills, entrepreneurial initiatives, and transnational networks. At the same time, diaspora communities can play a strategic role in supporting demographic revitalization through investment, knowledge transfer, and circular mobility².

Although some research conducted in Moldova highlights the beneficial effects of migration and the diaspora on national development – particularly through the transfer of professional skills, knowledge, and remittance flows that help sustain the domestic economy³ – the dimension concerning the encouragement of return migration and the sustainable reintegration of migrants remains insufficiently explored in the academic literature⁴. This gap is particularly significant in the case of a country with persistently high emigration levels, such as Moldova, where the human and economic potential of returnees could play a crucial role in enhancing both demographic and economic resilience. Consequently, there is a pressing need for in-depth studies that not only examine the individual and contextual factors shaping return migration, but also evaluate the effectiveness of public policies designed to transform this process into a driver of national development.

In this context, the present research aims to address two key questions: What is the actual profile and scale of return migration? To what extent are

¹ N. Gailey, O. Gagauz, I. Pahomii, *Demographic change and the future of resilience planning*, 2025, p. 6-10; L. Bogdan, *The exodus of Moldova: Understanding the migration dilemma*, 2024, online-first; G. Savelieva, S. Zaharov, *Challenges of labor market transformations towards social policies in the Republic of Moldova*, 2021, p. 98.

² C. Mueller, *Diaspora return and knowledge transfer*, 2022, p. 332-337; S. Dickerson, C. Ozden, *Diaspora engagement and return migration policies*, 2018, p. 207.

³ A. Ianioglo et. al., *Return migration in the Republic of Moldova: Main issues and opportunities*, 2021, p. 9-11; D. Roșca, *A transnational exchange mechanism among Moldovan migrants in the Parisian region: Exploring the post office of Moldova*, 2023, p. 7-8; P. Pinger, *Come back or stay? Spend here or there? Return and remittances: The case of Moldova*, 2010, p. 146.

⁴ M. Hachi, S. Morozan & M. Popa, *Challenges of return migration to the Republic of Moldova in the context of international migration flow*, 2021, p. 43.

return migration and the diaspora supported by public authorities as strategic resources for strengthening demographic resilience, in the face of persistent emigration and ongoing population decline? Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the magnitude and dynamics of return migration among Moldovan citizens over the past decade, assess national policy efforts to harness the potential of the diaspora, and analyse the contribution of these processes to reinforcing demographic resilience amid continuous population loss.

Theoretical Insights into Return Migration, Diaspora Contributions, and Resilience

Neoclassical economic theory and the New Economics of Labour Migration do not succeed in incorporating return migration into their explanatory frameworks, as they were developed in the mid-1960s in the context of relatively stable labour markets—conditions that differ markedly from today’s realities, characterised by demographic crises and continuous transnational and circular mobility. These theories focus primarily on wage gains, individual migration costs, and household decision-making, without accounting for the role of diasporas, social networks, and their contribution to the resilience of origin communities.

In this regard, Cassarino⁵ argues for the need to revise the conceptual framework of return migration, emphasising that, from the perspective of transnationalism and social network theory, return should no longer be seen as the end of migration, but rather as a stage embedded within a cyclical process of mobility. From a transnational standpoint, return migration is closely tied to the maintenance of ongoing connections with the country of origin. Remittances, pensions, and social benefits acquired abroad can be considered important resources that contribute not only to the economy of the sending state but also to its social and political life. Furthermore, transnationalism highlights the fact that the education and skills gained abroad facilitate the social mobility of migrants upon return, offering them opportunities for repositioning and advancement in a different socio-economic context.

By contrast, social network theory underscores the role of relational capital and the resources mobilised through connections between migrants and their communities. From this perspective, remittances and savings are viewed as a foundation for investments and projects that can ensure a safer reintegration. At the same time, social networks facilitate the transfer of knowledge and professional experience acquired abroad, thereby

⁵ J-P. Cassarino, *Theorising return migration: The conceptual approach to return migrants revisited*, 2004, pp. 255-257.

strengthening the prospects of migrants to reintegrate successfully and to achieve a sustainable return⁶.

In this study, the *theoretical framework of transnationalism* is employed to explain the persistence of strong social and economic ties between migrants' countries of origin and destination. From this perspective, return migration is not interpreted as the conclusion of a cycle but rather as part of an ongoing and circular form of mobility⁷, in which the transfer of knowledge, experience, financial and social resources, plays a crucial role⁸. Regular contact with families in the country of origin, together with remittances and periodic visits, facilitates a better-prepared reintegration process for migrants⁹.

At the same time, in recent decades, governments of emigration countries have become increasingly active in their engagement with diasporas, seeking to involve them in the political, economic, and social life of the homeland¹⁰. This collaboration has led to new institutionalised forms of cooperation, including the creation of state bodies and para-state institutions designed primarily to address economic and security concerns, rather than to directly encourage the return of migrants¹¹.

Thus, transnationalism encompasses more than family and community relationships; it also includes collective, goal-oriented initiatives that have gradually gained visibility in both political and economic arenas.

Human capital theory posits that migration is a form of investment through which individuals seek to maximise their economic and social returns by acquiring education, professional experience, and qualifications. In the context of international migration, migrants accumulate human capital in destination countries in the form of knowledge, skills, and competences¹². However, migration is not only about the accumulation of human capital; it also encompasses social and economic capital. J.S.Coleman¹³ when introducing the concept of "social capital", described it as analogous to financial and human capital, but embedded in the

⁶ Ibidem, p. 269.

⁷ Ö. Bilgili, *Return and transnationalism*, 2022, p. 40-43.

⁸ P. Levitt, *Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion*, 1998, p. 927.

⁹ A. Portes, L.E. Guarnizo & P. Landolt, *The study of transnationalism: Pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field*, 1999, p. 224.

¹⁰ Ö. Bilgili & M.B. Erdal, *Migrant transnationalism: IMISCOE short reader*, 2025, p. 83-88.

¹¹ A.A. Muhumad & D.K. Thompson, *Decentralization and diaspora capture: Transnationalism, autocracy, and hybrid power in federal Ethiopia*, 2024, pp. 3024-3034; L. Brand, *States and their expatriates: Explaining the development of Tunisian and Moroccan migration-related institutions*, 2002, pp. 27-30.

¹² L.A. Sjaastad, *The costs and returns of human migration*, 1962, pp. 86-90.

¹³ J.S. Coleman, *Social capital in the creation of human capital*, 1988, p. 98.

relationships between individuals. He highlighted two core features: its basis in social structures, particularly relational networks, and its role in facilitating the actions of individuals and collective actors within those structures. Applied to international migration, social capital is reinforced through the networks of contacts and professional or community relationships developed abroad, while financial capital is built through income and savings.

Upon return to the country of origin, or through the maintenance of transnational ties, these forms of capital – human, social, and financial – can be reinvested in economic, social, and cultural activities. Return migration thus becomes not only an individual process but also a collective mechanism of development, enabling the transfer of accumulated resources back to origin communities. In this sense, the capital acquired abroad has the potential to contribute to social mobility, innovation, and the strengthening of the domestic labour market. It also facilitates productive investment and entrepreneurial initiatives, while diasporic networks provide access to international markets, knowledge, and opportunities. Migration is therefore no longer viewed exclusively as a loss of human resources (“brain drain”), but rather as an opportunity for the circulation and valorisation of accumulated capital (“brain circulation”, (“brain gain”)¹⁴.

*The concept of demographic resilience*¹⁵ provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding how societies with small and demographically and economically vulnerable populations, such as the Republic of Moldova, can absorb and manage shocks while maintaining functionality and development capacity. Within this logic, return migration and the active engagement of the diaspora can be seen as key mechanisms for strengthening demographic resilience. Human, social, and financial capital accumulated abroad and brought back by migrants has the potential to reduce demographic imbalances, support the labour market, and revitalise local communities through the transfer of skills, resources, and networks.

The return of migrants and the mobilisation of diaspora capital not only offset the losses caused by large-scale emigration but also open additional prospects for innovation, entrepreneurship, and social development. From this perspective, migration is integrated into strategies for strengthening demographic resilience, transforming it from a source of vulnerability into a resource for long-term demographic and socio-economic sustainability.

¹⁴ C. Dustmann, I. Fadlon, & Y. Weiss, *Return migration, human capital accumulation and the brain drain*, 2011, p. 66.

¹⁵ UNFPA, *Demographic resilience: Concept and policy implications*, 2021, p. 4.

Methodology

This paper is based on the results obtained from the analysis of statistical data concerning return migration, as well as on a public policy study conducted by the author in 2024. The public policy study was conducted using content analysis and SWOT analysis methods, with the aim of identifying recorded achievements, persistent gaps, emerging challenges, and opportunities for strengthening the policy framework. The analysis covered approximately 80 policy documents developed and implemented by the institutions responsible for managing the migration phenomenon, as well as their annual reports published during the period 2000 to the present.

The analyzed data were obtained from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and refer to international migration disaggregated by sex, major age groups, and citizenship for the period 2014-2023. While this statistical series has been frequently employed in my previous studies¹⁶, a particularly valuable recent addition is the disaggregation of migration flows by citizenship. The availability of these more detailed data provides a significant analytical opportunity, allowing for the first time a direct and rigorous examination of return migration – a phenomenon widely discussed but insufficiently quantified until now.

The measurement of emigration and immigration flows by the NBS is based on international recommendations and the concept of usual residence¹⁷. According to NBS definitions, an emigrant is any person who resided in the Republic of Moldova for at least one year before moving abroad for a minimum period of one year. Conversely, an immigrant is someone who lived abroad for at least one year and returned to Moldova with the intention of staying for at least one year. International recommendations specify that temporary absences for leisure, medical treatment, or pilgrimage are not considered migration¹⁸. For this reason, the NBS has set the one-year threshold as the equivalent of 275 days out of the 365 days in a calendar year. These 275 days are calculated cumulatively within one year and do not necessarily represent a consecutive number of days.

In the context of this study, return migration refers to the return of Moldovan citizens after a period of residence abroad. The analysis focuses exclusively on long-term migration, in accordance with the definition of usual residence. Based on these official data, we calculated net migration rates by age, sex, and citizenship of migrants. The results are outlined next.

¹⁶ O. Gagauz, T. Tabac, I. Pahomii, *Depopulation in Moldova: The main challenge in the context of extremely high emigration*, 2023, p. 429; T. Tabac, *International migration and population changes in Moldova*, 2021, p. 5-7.

¹⁷ UN, *Recommendations on statistics of international migration*, 1998, p. 67-69.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 67-69.

Main Results

1. Net Migration of Moldovan Citizens versus Foreign Nationals. The analysis of net migration in the period from 2014 to 2023 reveals a significant demographic impact on the Republic of Moldova. The cumulative absolute value of net migration during this timeframe stands at -370.3 thousand people (Table 1), equivalent to a decline of approximately 13% in the resident population, solely due to international migration. The sharpest annual loss occurred in 2022 (-63.4 thousand people), likely as a result of multiple contributing factors, including post-pandemic effects and regional instability caused by the war in Ukraine.

Net migration of Moldovan citizens is the primary driver of this demographic shift, accounting for -345.9 thousand over the ten-year period, which represents 93.4% of the total negative net migration. In contrast, the net migration of foreign nationals in Moldova is also negative, but to a lesser extent (-24.4 thousand), contributing 6.6% to the overall population decrease.

However, in the case of countries such as Romania and the Russian Federation, data indicate slightly positive net migration during certain intervals. For Romanian citizens, the migration balance fluctuated significantly throughout the period, most likely reflecting labor mobility. Some years recorded positive net balances (2018, 2019, 2022), while others saw net losses (2016, 2017, 2023).

Table 1. Net migration by citizenship of migrants, years 2014-2023, absolute numbers and rates per 1000 population

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
<i>thousand</i>											
Total	-24.2	-21.4	-46.1	-50.7	-42.0	-37.1	-7.2	-45.4	-63.6	-32.6	-370.3
Republic of Moldova	-17.8	-18.7	-37.7	-40.5	-44.3	-45.1	-6.9	-47.3	-61.4	-26.2	-345.9
Other countries:	-6.4	-2.7	-8.4	-10.2	2.3	8.0	-0.3	1.9	-2.2	-6.4	-24.4
among which:											
Romania	-1.1	-0.8	-8.2	-9.7	3.4	4.1	-0.3	-0.4	0.2	-1.5	-14.2
Russia	-6.0	-1.8	-1.1	-0.4	-0.3	2.9	0.8	2.1	1.5	1.2	-1.0
Ukraine	0.7	-1.0	0.6	-0.2	-0.7	0.4	-0.1	0.4	-3.6	-7.2	-10.7
<i>per 1,000 population</i>											
Total	-8	-8	-16	-18	-15	-14	-3	-17	-25	-13	
Republic of Moldova	-6	-7	-13	-15	-16	-17	-3	-18	-24	-11	
Other countries	-2	-1	-3	-4	1	3	0	1	-1	-3	

Source: calculated by author using NBS data.

For Russian citizens, migration balances also varied, but overall showed the smallest deficit among all analyzed groups (-1.0 thousand). These figures may reflect the return of Moldovan nationals who had previously settled in Russia, particularly during the post-Soviet period, as well as the arrival of family members from Russia amid recent geopolitical developments.

Regarding Ukrainian citizens, net migration experienced notable fluctuations throughout the analyzed period, but the cumulative balance remains negative (-10.7 thousand). Nonetheless, there was a significant increase in net migration during 2022-2023, most likely influenced by the ongoing military conflict in the neighboring country.

A noteworthy aspect is the fact that the positive net migration balance recorded among Romanian and Russian citizens contributed to reducing the overall deficit resulting by international migration. Without this contribution, the negative balance would have been significantly higher. For instance, in 2018, total net migration stood at -42.0 thousand people, while the net migration of Moldovan citizens was -44.3 thousand. A similar situation was observed in 2019, when total net migration was -37.1 thousand, compared to -45.1 thousand for Moldovan citizens. The same trend continued in 2021, when the negative migration balance of Moldovan citizens exceeded the total net migration by 1.9 thousand people. In practice, in certain years, the population deficit caused by the emigration of Moldovan citizens was partially offset by net inflows of foreign nationals, particularly Romanian and Russian citizens.

2. Trends and Demographic Profiles of Return Migrants.

Throughout the analyzed period, significant fluctuations were observed in the annual number of Moldovan citizens returning to the country (Figure 1). The highest peak occurred in 2014, with a total of 57.1 thousand returns (23.0 thousand women and 34.1 thousand men). Following this year, a general downward trend became evident, reaching a relatively low in 2017 (35.0 thousand), which was then followed by a gradual recovery until 2021. In 2022, a new notable peak was recorded (46.2 thousand), followed by a slight decrease in 2023 (38.4 thousand).

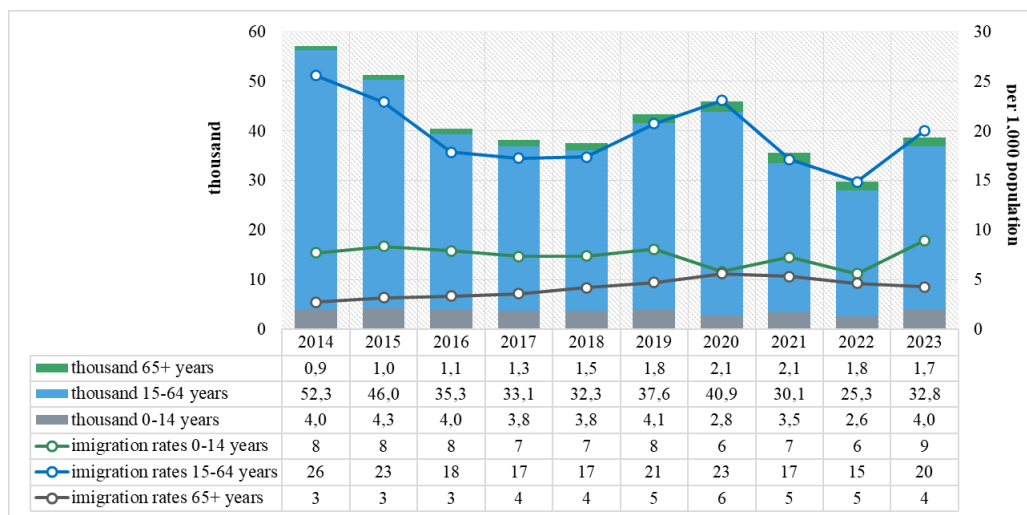


Figure 1. Return migration of Moldovan citizens (immigration) by sexes, years 2014–2023, absolute numbers and rates per 1,000 population

Source: calculated by author using NBS data.

Across the entire period, men consistently accounted for the majority of returnees, with male return migration clearly exceeding that of women. The gender ratio remained relatively stable, reflecting a masculinized structure of return migration. This trend can be attributed to a greater male presence in labor migration, as well as the potentially higher capacity of men to reintegrate into the Moldovan labor market, including within informal sectors.

Immigration rates calculated per 1,000 population confirm the trends observed in the absolute data, though at a higher level than initial estimates. For instance, in 2014, the return rate of Moldovan citizens stood at 20‰, declining to 14‰ during the 2016-2018 period, followed by a modest recovery in subsequent years. The values ranging from 12‰ to 15‰ between 2022 and 2023 indicate a moderate resurgence of the return migration flows. These rates more accurately capture the intensity of return migration compared to absolute figures.

Figure 2 illustrates the annual evolution of return migration in Moldova, disaggregated into three age groups: 0-14 years, 15-64 years, and 65+ years. The data are presented in both absolute terms (thousands) and relative terms (rates per 1,000 population), providing a clear overview of shifts in migratory behavior throughout the analyzed decade.

The working-age population (15-64 years) has consistently accounted for the largest share of return migration. The highest volume was recorded in 2014 (52.3 thousand), followed by a sharp decline through 2017-2018

(32.3-33.1 thousand). A further decrease is evident in 2021-2022, with the number of returnees dropping to around 30 and 25 thousand, respectively. By 2023, however, this trend appears to reverse slightly, indicating a renewed increase in return migration among this group.

Children (0-14 years) returned in relatively stable numbers, fluctuating between 2.6 and 4.3 thousand individuals over the entire period. Slightly higher figures were observed at the beginning of the decade and again toward 2023. The elderly population (65+ years) experienced a gradual but steady increase in return migration from 2014 to 2021 (from 0.9 to 2.1 thousand persons), followed by a modest decline in the subsequent two years.

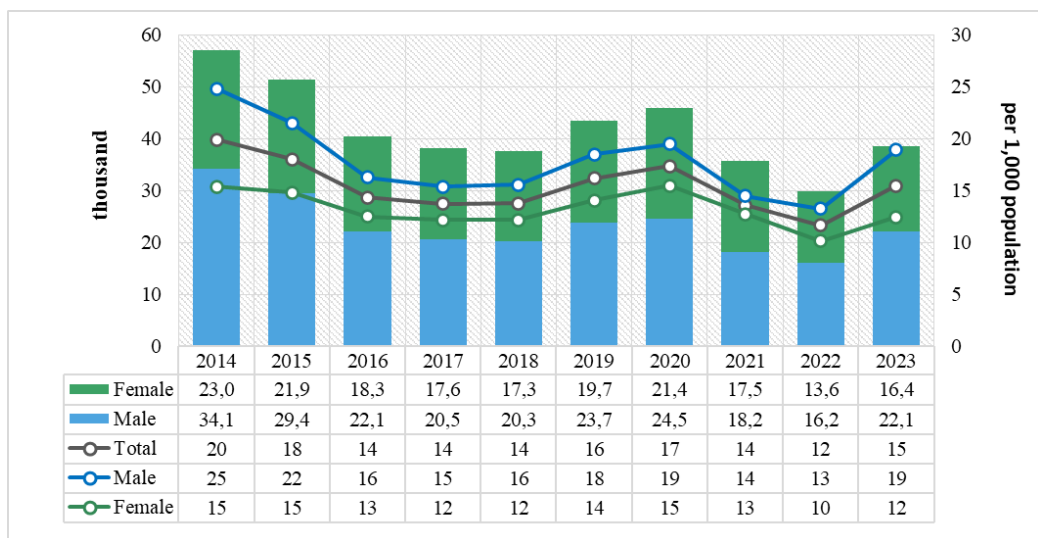


Figure 2. Return migration of Moldovan citizens (immigration) by major age groups, years 2014–2023, absolute numbers and rates per 1,000 population

Source: calculated using NBS data.

Return migration rates highlight the intensity of this phenomenon. The 15-64 age group registered the highest rates in 2014 (26‰) and 2015 (23‰), followed by a clear downward trend, reaching a low of 15‰ in 2022, before rising again to 20‰ in 2023. These fluctuations suggest a decline in the attractiveness of return among the working-age population, likely influenced by stagnant economic opportunities in Moldova and stronger integration of migrants in host countries.

Among children, return migration rates remained relatively stable (between 6‰ and 9‰) throughout the period, indicating a moderate and balanced return flow for this group. For the 65+ cohort, rates increased progressively until 2021, reflecting a more pronounced return during the

peak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, likely driven by vulnerability and family reunification needs.

3. *Harnessing Migration's Potential through Return, Reintegration, and Capital Transfer Policies.* Harnessing Migration's Potential through Return, Reintegration, and Capital Transfer Policies. Moldova has made substantial progress in developing a dedicated policy framework aimed at fostering diaspora engagement and supporting the reintegration of returning migrants. Following the implementation of two action plans on the (re)integration of return migrants (2011-2015 and 2017-2020), the National Programme for Stimulating Returns and Facilitating the (Re)Integration of Citizens of the Republic of Moldova Involved in the Migration Process for 2023-2027¹⁹ was approved under the coordination of the Bureau for Diaspora Relations (BDR). This programme aims to support the return of Moldovan citizens and their families by ensuring access to social, medical, and educational services, facilitating economic opportunities, and promoting civic engagement. Its overarching goal is to establish an efficient and sustainable system for the return and reintegration of migrants, while strengthening both the institutional and policy framework.

With the objective of harnessing the human and economic potential of the diaspora, the BDR, with the support of international partners (UNDP, OIM), implements National Youth Economic Empowerment Programme and the Diaspora Engagement Hub. These programmes aim to stimulate migrant investment in the economy and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills. Moreover, the BDR oversees the implementation of the National Diaspora Strategy 2025²⁰, which seeks to establish a sustainable and comprehensive framework for cooperation between state institutions and Moldovan citizens residing overseas. This framework is founded on trust and joint initiatives, with the principal objective of enabling productive return pathways for members of the diaspora and integrating them into national development processes.

Collaboration between the National Agency for Research and Development (NARD) and the BDR has become increasingly, particularly in capitalizing on the human capital and professional expertise of the scientific

¹⁹ Government Decision No. 674/2023 of 13.09.2023 on the approval of the National Programme for Encouraging Returns and Facilitating the (Re)Integration of Citizens of the Republic of Moldova Involved in the Migration Process for the years 2023–2027, 2023.

²⁰ Government Decision No. 200 of 26-02-2016 on the approval of the National Strategy “Diaspora-2025” and the Action Plan for 2016–2018 for its implementation, 2016.

diaspora. In February 2025, NARD is launching the ReBRAIN Programm²¹ – Programme for Joint Collaborative Projects between the Scientific Diaspora and Organisations in the Fields of Research and Innovation in the Republic of Moldova. This initiative aims to leverage the expertise of the scientific diaspora by promoting the transfer of knowledge, innovations, technologies, and international networks, thereby enhancing the internationalization of national research organizations and the development of the national economy. A total of ten joint collaboration projects with the scientific diaspora have been approved for funding in the upcoming year, with a total budget exceeding 4.6 million MDL (approx. EUR 234,5 thousand).

In addition to the programmes implemented by the BDR and NARD, it is essential to highlight the PARE 1+2 Programme²², which builds upon the earlier PARE 1+1 Programme²³ initiated in 2010 by the Organisation for Entrepreneurship Development (OED, formerly ODIMM). This programme is specifically designed to support investments financed from the remittances of migrant workers. Since 2022, the programme has been structured around two core components. The first offers non-reimbursable financial support to migrants and their first-degree family members, following the 1+1 rule – meaning that for every leu invested from remittances, the programme provides an additional leu, with the maximum grant amounting to 250,000 MDL (EUR 12.7 thousand). The second component targets businesses established by migrants seeking to expand their operations and operates under the 1+2 rule—each leu of personal contribution is matched by two lei from the programme. The maximum grant under this component may not exceed 500,000 lei (approx. EUR 25,5 thousand)²⁴.

Empirical research has highlighted multiple challenges faced by returning migrants and their families, including children born abroad. These difficulties stem primarily from a lack of adequate information regarding economic opportunities in the Republic of Moldova, particularly

²¹ <https://ancd.gov.md/ro/content/concursul-%E2%80%9Eprogram-de-proiecte-comune-de-colaborare-%C3%AEntre-diaspora-%C8%99tiin%C8%9Bific%C4%83-%C8%99i>

²² Government of the Republic of Moldova, (2022), Government Decision No. 622 of 07-09-2022 on the approval of the Program for Attracting Remittances into the Economy “PARE 1+2”, 2022.

²³ Government of the Republic of Moldova, (2010), Government Decision No. 972 of 18-10-2010 on the Program for Attracting Remittances into the Economy “PARE 1+1” for the years 2010–2024, 2010.

²⁴ Government of the Republic of Moldova, (2022), Government Decision No. 622 of 07-09-2022 on the approval of the Program for Attracting Remittances into the Economy “PARE 1+2”, 2022.

in relation to the labour market and business start-up prospects. Additional obstacles include difficulties in adapting to local living standards, such as underdeveloped infrastructure and significant disparities in wage levels between Moldova and destination countries. Furthermore, the social reintegration of migrants' children continues to pose a major challenge²⁵.

With respect to the utilisation of accumulated financial capital, migrants' remittances are predominantly channelled towards consumption, especially the purchase and modernisation of housing. Nevertheless, there exists a segment of migrants who work abroad with the explicit aim of accumulating the financial resources needed to launch or expand a business. Most of the businesses established by migrants are concentrated in the agricultural sector – a phenomenon attributable to both the structure of the national economy and the rural background of a large portion of the emigrant workforce. Simultaneously, there is a notable rise in innovative entrepreneurship, driven by the knowledge and skills acquired overseas. As a result, migrants are contributing to the diversification of the domestic market by introducing new plant and animal species, adopting modern cultivation techniques, and transferring advanced technologies into the food industry²⁶.

According to OED's annual reports, between 2011 and 2023, approximately 2,100 investment projects initiated by migrant workers or their relatives were approved for funding. The total value of grants is estimated at around 458 million MDL (approx. EUR 23.4 million), with mobilised investments reaching approximately 1.3 billion MDL (approx. EUR 66.3 million). These measures have supported job creation and diversification of the local market, yet they remain insufficient to significantly mitigate labour emigration, which continues to have a severe impact on demographic trends. Additionally, the implementation of entrepreneurial projects by migrants is often hindered by a lack of raw materials, inadequate equipment, high customs duties, limited information on investment opportunities, and an absence of a clear vision for market niches – all of which undermine the sustainability of such investments²⁷.

The integration of returning migrants into the labour market is also far from optimal. Although *Mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications* and an *Inter-institutional referral mechanism for reintegration* have been established, the system for assessing competencies gained abroad remains

²⁵ A. Ianioglo et. al., *Return migration in the Republic of Moldova: Main issues and opportunities*, 2021, p. 7-7; p. 11.

²⁶ Organization for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Sector (ODIMM), (2019), p.32-33.

²⁷ A. Ianioglo et. al., *Return migration in the Republic of Moldova: Main issues and opportunities*, 2021, p. 9.

underdeveloped, and the alignment of these competencies with relevant occupational fields is weak at the level of public policy.

Moreover, programmes aimed at the economic empowerment of young people and initiatives targeting the professional diaspora are partial in scope. They do not systematically include those who have returned permanently, focusing instead primarily on citizens still residing abroad. Until recently, collaboration with the scientific diaspora has been fragmented and underutilised. The ten projects funded by NARD this year mark an important step forward, yet they fall short of fully harnessing the potential of this demographic.

The most significant gap remains the absence of a centralised coordination mechanism for migration policies, coupled with poor information-sharing among relevant institutions. This fragmentation undermines the effectiveness of public policy in both managing international migration and leveraging the potential of returning migrants and the diaspora to bolster demographic resilience.

Conclusions and discussions

The cumulative loss of 370.3 thousand people recorded between 2014 and 2023 highlights the heightened demographic vulnerability of Moldova, against the backdrop of an already pronounced natural population decline. The negative net migration of Moldovan citizens, accounting for 93.4% of the total international migration balance, underscores both the limited contribution of foreign nationals to negative net migration and, more importantly, the fact that the main driver of demographic imbalance is the exodus of the country's own population. This heightened demographic vulnerability highlights the strategic role of return migration and diaspora engagement in strengthening demographic resilience. By reintroducing human capital, particularly working-age individuals, and by facilitating compensatory flows of resources, knowledge, and skills, these processes can contribute to mitigating the immediate effects of emigration-driven imbalances.

The analysis shows that although the number of foreign residents in Moldova remains relatively low, certain groups – particularly Romanian and Russian citizens – have had a compensatory effect on demographic losses, mitigating the negative net migration balance. Even in 2021, amid the pandemic and economic uncertainties, total net migration was approximately 1.9 thousand people less negative than the figure for Moldovan citizens alone. While this phenomenon may help slow population loss in the short term, its structural impact is limited in the long run, given the relatively small scale of these inflows compared to the large-scale emigration of Moldovan citizens.

The findings also highlight the continued male predominance in return migration, not just in international migration as a whole²⁸, implicitly reflecting men's relatively greater ability to reintegrate into the domestic labour market. There is also confirmation of the sustained predominance of working-age individuals among returnees – a feature of migratory selection – as well as a slight upward trend in the return of elderly persons. The predominance of working-age individuals among returnees is particularly significant in demographic terms. Their reintegration contributes directly to demographic resilience by replenishing the labour force, mitigating ageing pressures, and partially offsetting the outflow of younger cohorts abroad. Beyond their demographic weight, returnees also bring back diverse forms of capital – financial, human, social, and technological – which amplify their developmental impact. These resources not only support household well-being and entrepreneurial initiatives but also strengthen the country's adaptive capacity, thereby transforming return migration into a multifaceted driver of demographic resilience and sustainable development.

Over the past decade, Moldova has developed a complex institutional and programmatic framework aimed at harnessing the human and economic potential of its diaspora and facilitating the reintegration of returning migrants. The diversity of programmes – ranging from economic and entrepreneurial initiatives to programs for engaging youth and the scientific diaspora – reflects a multidimensional approach focused not only on investment and capital transfer but also on mobilising knowledge, skills, and international networks. This evolution marks a shift from fragmented policies towards a more coherent model of institutional cooperation, grounded in partnership and mutual trust, with the potential to transform return migration into an active driver of national development.

Although Moldova has established a relatively solid policy framework in the area of return migration and diaspora engagement, the effectiveness of many initiatives remains below expectations. This highlights an urgent need to diversify and expand programmes aimed at attracting remittances and unlocking the economic potential of migrants. Key opportunities lie in developing financial support schemes for migrants wishing to invest in the country, with careful attention to avoiding tensions or perceptions of discrimination against the local population.

At the same time, Moldova could benefit from establishing bilateral agreements with countries that host significant segments of its diaspora, to encourage investment from those looking to return home. Drawing up a clear list of economic priority sectors where migrants can invest, and providing financial incentives in these areas, would be an important step in

²⁸ T. Tabac, *International migration and population changes in Moldova*, 2021, p. 6.

shifting remittances from being merely a tool for consumption to becoming a driver of sustainable development.

Another strategic pillar involves supporting youth entrepreneurship and promoting innovation, by channelling remittances into local businesses and value-added projects. Moreover, engaging skilled professionals from the diaspora – including by offering teaching opportunities in universities and colleges – could facilitate the transfer of knowledge and expertise, strengthening human capital development and helping to stem the mass emigration of young people.

An equally vital aspect is the promotion of transnational mobility through more flexible recognition of professional qualifications, thus easing the movement of labour while maintaining strong ties to the country of origin. In this context, circular and temporary migration, structured through employment contracts with other countries, may offer a viable solution for ensuring that workers can return periodically and continue contributing directly to Moldova's economy.

By capitalising on these strategic directions, Moldova has a valuable opportunity to transform migration and the diaspora from sources of demographic vulnerability into key drivers of resilience and sustainable national development. Both return migration and diaspora engagement can be viewed not merely as social or economic phenomena but as strategic resources for demographic resilience. By stabilising population dynamics, sustaining human capital, and creating feedback loops between origin and destination countries, these processes provide Moldova with adaptive capacity in the face of persistent emigration and natural decline.

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