

## Transnational Migration in the Moldovan-German Context, or: My *Totul va fi bine* (Road)trip

### **Report on my field research in the framework of the PLURAL Research Fellowship, March-May 2023**

About 40 hours on the road for a good 2,000 kilometres. What may sound like an adventure at first glance is normality for many Moldovan migrants who work as construction workers, care givers and seasonal workers in agriculture, but also for those who come as students or visiting grandparents. Every day, dozens of coaches and minibuses leave Moldova for southern and western Europe. It was a given that I wanted to make my experiences with the route to Germany - and back again - as I am doing research on and with those who have to make this route part of their life.

To this day, the bus network has not been completely replaced by air travel, but it has become more professional over the years. Among my contacts, this plan of a Marcus-inspired *following* the masses in their busses nevertheless triggered a mixture of amusement and concern, which I threw overboard in order to gain the impressions that conversation and exploration of the locally fixed field alone can hardly offer me from an absolutely safe distance.

Anyone who wants to study transnational migration necessarily must consciously integrate the transnational, for example in the form of this infrastructure of mobility, into their (research) everyday life and find their way through the confusion and the feeling of being overwhelmed that this sometimes holds in store. This was my vague plan for further and, above all, mobile exploration of the Moldovan-German context when I set off for Chişinău in the spring of 2023 to take a closer look at the reference site of my field, Moldova. The fact that I was able to do this is largely thanks to the PLURAL Research Fellowship, which I took up in March 2023 for three months of field research– vă mulțumesc mult pentru încredere și susținere!

In my cultural studies dissertation project, I deal with transnational migrants and the styles and strategies of maintaining contact that they exercise in the Moldovan-German context. I focus on individuals and families, but also try to include institutions such as associations of Moldovans abroad and infrastructures of mobility as well as consumption, such as bus companies and shops or restaurants.

In essence, I am concerned with the question of how Moldovans with migration experience construct their relationship to their context of origin, especially from abroad. To this end, I approach the practical strategies of their contact with Moldova and ask how this influences their relationship to the country and its people. I also try to draw conclusions from this about the complicated relationship to the term *diaspora*, which has emerged here as a key concept, albeit a conflictual one. Other key terms and concepts in my study include cultural baggage, both tangible and intangible, social networks that emerge transnationally and communitarianisation that is negotiated across distances.

While my research perspective at the very beginning of the project was still - and as it turned out: wrongly - focused on pure labour migration, de facto guest work, which is clearly present but does not cover everything, I was able to significantly diversify my perspective through interviews already conducted in Germany in 2022: Migration is not a singular nor an easy interpretable phenomenon for Moldova and in general, but one that renegotiates positions, status, borders and values and is thus socially overarching. It is widely present - hardly a taxi driver who does not have his own or a family history of it, hardly a lamppost that does not have a "*Lucru în Europa*" advertisement.

The negotiation processes that accompany active migrants in particular, but also those who remain here, do not take place in a vacuum. They are culture- and region-specific and fed on historically grown patterns of the present. This should be reflected in my research, so I set myself the goal of ideally uniting both ends of migration in my approach. In practical terms, this means that I spoke with families who live multi-locally<sup>1</sup> in different ways, such as having relatives in both countries and linking them through mobility practices of varying intensity, be it through constant commuting or summer holidays *acasă*. Thus, my path to *Moldoveni în Germania* and their often widely ramified networks has so far led me to Berlin, Kassel, and Giessen, to Chişinău and its outskirts, to the Raions of Cantemir and Ungheni, as well as to a Transnistrian village, and has also taken place online with extended family members in Italy and the Netherlands, as well as under pandemic conditions.

In this way, I was able to continue numerous contacts made in Germany and also gain new ones, which show that both countries can only be thought of together through the transnational practices of the actors in this context.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless,

<sup>1</sup> See: Rolshoven, Johanna / Winkler, Justin. „Multilokalität und Mobilität.“ *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung* 2009 1/2: 99-106.

<sup>2</sup> See: Glick Schiller, Linda / Basch, Linda / Blanc-Szanton, Cristina. Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1992.



“ideally” already implies that those relatives in Moldova or Germany who were then to be the extension of my initial conversation were not always in agreement: In addition to simply other priorities, mistrust of questions from the outside or the idea that one had nothing important to tell, often played a role. Here, ongoing, and resilient contact work based on trust and mutual respect with already familiar interaction partners turned out to be vital for my research.

Field research and especially the conduct of conversations *pe parcurs* is an endurance run. In my case, it takes place - oriented towards the realities of my interlocutors' lives - in at least two national as well as in various social contexts and unites different codes. Tracing this can only be done in the sense of *multi-sited ethnography*<sup>3</sup>, which aims to bring together these different layers and spheres through the actors themselves. In my study, I rely on an ethnographic approach and aim to drill empirically deep in order to get close to the underlying patterns on the basis of individual life plans and their narration. I myself am an instrument of research, which may open up paths through contacts and a convenient knowledge of Romanian. Still, some also remained closed to me through gender, age, and life circumstances. This experience reveals not only a lot about my field, but also about my role in it - not only once was I asked how I, as a German, could voluntarily do research here and whether I would not rather write about the economic prosperity of some returnees. Although such *business* approaches, which emerged from migration, are thematically not entirely remote, I tried to communicate my interest in more everyday cultural, interfamilial practices, which was sometimes far from successful in every context, yet often far from the general expectation of what I would be most interested in.

While I experienced a wonderful, intensive Easter weekend of participant observation in the circle of a family with diverse migration experience, in the course of which other relatives were repeatedly brought “to the table” via video chat, there were also sobering experiences: I am still practising Moldovan time culture and spontaneity and sometimes doubt my rather lax understanding of bureaucratic relations, which to me in Moldova are far more characterised by authority than I am used to. I found it strange that the office for diaspora relations, for example, was only willing to talk to me after some advocacy by colleagues and enquiries, but that I was then neither expected nor given more in-depth answers, but rather a reference to the website and material to read on my own. I felt as if I had missed the chance to strike the right notes here in order to tickle deeper answers out of my interview partners. On the other hand, the topic is so central in this country and the German diaspora is definitely present in various

<sup>3</sup> See: Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 1995, 24: 95-117.

organisational structures. So why didn't the highest authority of this *imagined community* take the opportunity to present itself accordingly to academics? It will probably remain a mystery to me – especially regarding the warm and welcoming Diaspora group at the General Assembly for a European Moldova several weeks later. However, the fact that the concept of *the diaspora* and its design is a sticking point of my research project became apparent not only in the conversations with foreign Moldovans, but also with local decision-makers. At least this is an issue I am still chewing on.

Overall, however, the enriching and sometimes humbling experiences outweigh the negative ones. So, it may seem clichéd at first glance to talk about the overflowing hospitality or the infectious optimism of purpose alternating with fatalism - next to *Asta este, Totul va fi bine*. was probably the phrase I heard the most - but these are the things that first come to mind when I think of my stay in Moldova. Besides various kinds of *Bucuria* - the iconic chocolates in coloured paper - things like the home-gathered herbal tea that a grandmother I interviewed gifted me and the travel-sized saint's picture that a family gave me for Easter will surely provide me for some time with the memories that my conversation partners otherwise take as essential, tangible or intangible content from their remittance packages fuelling the bond.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it seemed to me that I could have extended the time I spent here - travel to Transnistria once more, visit other places in the countryside, and last but not least, wait for the Moldovan early summer as such a tempting season and see when, at the latest during the holidays, the diaspora is more regularly present. To follow Ulf Hannerz here is less an excuse or consolation than a plea for a pragmatic approach to the field: “[E]thnography is an art of the possible, and it may be better to have some of it than none at all. And so, we do it now and then, fitting it into our lives when we have a chance.”<sup>5</sup> This might have become my mantra.

In this respect, and following this pragmatic approach, I am returning to Germany after three months of field research in various places and with very different people in the city and in the countryside, rich in impressions of the *Moldoveni în Germania* and their families as well as the returnees in the country of origin. The fact that the total phenomenon of migration is one of the most formative factors of the Republic of Moldova is by no means a new insight, but how this formative power can take on different forms, and thereby may tear down old borders, but also build

<sup>4</sup> This topic is expanded on here: Stöxen, Jana. “Parcels, Pills, and Pufuleți. Remittances as Transnational Strategy of Migration between the Republic of Moldova & Germany”, *Südosteuropäische Mitteilungen* (to be published in summer 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Hannerz, Ulf. “Being there... and there... and there!: Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography.” *Ethnography*. 2003; 4 (2): 201-216, 213.



up new ones, is something that can be paradigmatically shown especially in this biographical, everyday cultural perspective. Europeanisation tendencies of those who benefit from free access to the market meet here with the attempt to preserve local heritage, which is not at all excluded entirely. Retraditionalization, especially in rural areas due to the exodus of the mainly male working population, clashes with innovation and emancipation on the part of those who use their experience from abroad as a resource. Nevertheless, everyone seems to agree that Moldova still has a long way to go, even though there are discussions about the destination and the route, which are conducted in many languages and voices and can only be understood intersectionally. For example, the question arises as to how the crux of the diaspora, under which many can be categorised in purely practical terms but to which incomparably fewer profess to belong, can be one that can determine the fate of the country that is developing ever further towards Europe and yet is still divided in two. While this can hardly be answered in simple terms, I hope that the selection of what has been and will have been surveyed in this project will at least provide further insights into how keeping in touch is something that goes hand in hand with caring and worrying, and while it is more related to the local area, it radiates from the practices to the formation of values and is thus able to initiate larger discourses. It is no coincidence that a large part of those active in politics and culture in the country, to whom the diaspora looks so expectantly, is fed by the diaspora itself, shares its experiences and holds just as much potential for conflict as for the future.

With this cautiously positive outlook, I am happy to say goodbye for the time being to a country whose resilience has so far remained a charming puzzle to me, despite all the travels and conversations in the most positive sense: *La revedere, Moldova, ai grijă de tine - și pe curând!* Only: next time, despite all the fascination, I will not travel by bus from Germany again.

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